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EAN

"Uh . . . Kenan?" Kel asked nervously.

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared!" Kel whined, his voice high and frightened. "Why did you make me watch all the bloodsucking movies, Kenan?"

A small, secret smile danced across Kenan's boyish features. "Well then, for you we'll just leave one light on. But just for you. Okay?"

Kel chewed nervously on his lower lip. "Okay, thanks, Kenan. Good night." He continued to stare straight up at the ceiling, unblinking. So did Kenan. An hour later, they were still staring. Two hours later: still staring. Two hours and twenty-two minutes later, they had both finally drifted off to sleep.

Kel's eyeballs danced underneath his sleeping lids, almost like they had a horrible and frightening life of their own. His body twitched. He was dreaming something. But what?

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KENAN & KEL™

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IL 5+

For Alex, Zak, and Tyler

FRANKELSTEIN

OPEN

"Good day, fellow book readers. And welcome to another Kenan and Kel book starring myself, Kenan."

"And myself, Kel!"

"You know what, Kel, I really do enjoy starring in these books."

"Me too, Kenan, it's just like starring in our TV show except with less pictures."

"Yeah, and the great thing about these books is we can go anywhere and do anything. The sky's the limit!"

"Ohhh! Does that mean we can shrink ourselves and travel into our own stomachs?"

"Eeeeeewwww! Why would you want to travel into your own stomach, Kel? That's nasty."

"See, I accidentally swallowed my wallet earlier today, and I was kind of hoping to get it back."

"You swallowed your . . . but . . . man, what's wrong with you?"

"My feet kind of smell."

"Thank you, Kel."

"Ohhh, Kenan, are we about to start our book now?"

"Yes, but before we do, I need to warn the people who are reading it."

"Warn them? About what?"

"Well, Kel, I gotta warn them all about how scary this particular adventure is."

"Scary? What do you mean, scary?"

"I mean that the events that take place in this book are so scary that if you're reading it at home, all by yourself with the lights off, then . . . well, I don't know how you'll be reading, 'cause it'll be too dark."

"Kenan, I don't like scary. Scary scares me."

"Well then, Kel, you should probably skip pages 3 and 4, 'cause some really scary stuff happens there. And you also might not want to read pages 10, 12, 13–23, 25, 26, 28–31. You can go ahead and read page 39 though, 'cause

I say something really funny there. But after that, you might want to skip pages 40–72, and page 76 is pretty scary too, so you might not want to read that one."

"Wow! That's a lot of pages of scary stuff, Kenan."

"I know."

"But the rest of the book is okay to read?"

"Nah, it's all pretty scary! Now come on, scaredy-Kel!"

"Kenan! Why did you call me scaredy-Kel? Is it 'cause I'm scared? Kenan? Can't we do a book that revolves around me and a team of basketball-playing dolphins? Huh? Wouldn't that be good? Kenan? Kenan? Awwww, here it goes!"

CHAPTER ONE

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Carolyn Price screamed. Her pale blonde hair blew wildly across her face as the strong night breeze whipped it from side to side. The scream pierced the black night air like an ear-shattering siren. Windows rattled in their frames. Dogs howled and scurried off to find quieter places to chase their tails. Several birds that were flapping casually by suddenly wished that they had hands so that they could throw them over their little bird-ears to drown out the high, mind-numbing, brain-rattling shriek of fear below.

Unfortunately, the shadowy, lurching thing that slowly staggered toward Carolyn didn't

seem bothered by the noise at all. That was probably because its ears had fallen off its softly decomposing face about a block and a half back. Tatters of dirty clothing hung in rags off the creature's filthy body, which was dragging along the asphalt road as it staggered and lurched its way menacingly forward. Its eyes glowed a kind of pinkish shade of red as they stared in front of them, burning through the blackness like two evil pink jelly beans.

"Aaaahhhhh." The scream faded away as the girl's breath ran out. She fought to take in another lungful of air and tried to scream again. She couldn't breathe. She was frozen. Her pretty brown eyes were wide and glazed with fear. Her pretty brown nose was small and glazed with fear.

The girl's lip quivered, then her body began shaking all over as well. The monstrous thing slowly, steadily, scarily approached. She tried to turn away, to tear her gaze from the rotting corpse that was somehow, impossibly, and very, very slowly chasing after her, but she couldn't look away. It was too horrible to look away.

Her brain went numb. Unfortunately, her legs had also gone numb, which was too bad really, because if she could have only mustered the energy to walk briskly away, she could have easily outrun the evil creature that was slowly lumber-

ing her way, closing in on her. She knew exactly what it was, this thing that haunted and chased her. This was no ordinary monster. No, this was a Blood-Sucking Freak.

It's useful to note that in these enlightened times, it's generally considered rude to refer to things that are different or scary as "freaks." But considering the fact that the creature was actually a walking corpse that only sustained its evil deathly life by drinking the blood of its victims, "freak" seemed somehow appropriate. Besides, people are far less concerned with hurting the feelings of the evil undead.

A ghastly smile cracked its way across the decrepit crags of the creature's face, revealing the long, pointy, razor-sharp fangs that hid behind its lips. Those fangs could only be good for two things: drinking sodas without having to open the bottles first and, of course, blood sucking.

The girl ran.

The thick leafy branch that lay across the road directly behind her didn't mean to cause anyone any trouble. It was just minding its own branchy business. So it really wasn't the branch's fault when the girl's ankle struck it and she tumbled to the ground.

A twinge of pain shot up from her ankle, throbbed its way up her leg, and limped into her

brain. Her mouth twisted downwards in a scowl of pain and fear.

The wide, full moon hung low in the sky and seemed to glow with an eerie reddish light as if it were watching the goings-on with demonic moon-faced glee.

Carolyn knew that things weren't going her way. She screamed.

A dark, shuffling shadow fell across her pretty, frightened features. Two evil eyes seemed to glow a slightly more joyful shade of red that almost exactly matched the bloodred stains on its evil pointy teeth. Teeth that were just inches from the exposed flesh of Carolyn's pale neck. She screamed again. Louder, longer, even more irritatingly high-pitched. But it was no use. The demon leaned down and . . .

"What are you watching?!"

"AHHHHHHH!!!" Kenan and Kel jumped and screamed.

The bowl of popcorn that until recently was resting comfortably on Kenan's lap suddenly found itself flying through the air. Popcorn rained down across the couch like a fluffy, buttery, corny snowstorm. Several kernels drifted down and decided to rest in the short dreadlocks that poked their way off Kenan's head.

"Man, Kyra, don't scare us like that!" Kenan scolded his sister, pawing at his head to wipe away the popcorn.

"Yeah!" Kenan's best friend added. "You should scare us more like this!" Kel leapt up on the couch, jabbed his fingers into his mouth, and yanked his cheeks back over his teeth. He began hopping around, crossing his eyes and making blahhhh-blaahhhh-blooo noises. It was truly an odd sight.

Another thing that was odd was the fact that this wasn't even close to being the strangest thing Kenan had ever seen Kel do. After all, Kenan and Kel had been friends since they were kids, and that was a lot of time for Kel to do a lot of really odd things.

No, jumping up and down on a couch making really odd and bizarre noises was relatively tame by Kel standards. But still, it wasn't exactly normal.

Kenan shook his head slowly from side to side. He pressed his tongue firmly against the roof of his mouth, grabbed the bright purple collar of Kel's shirt, and yanked his goofy friend back down to the couch. Cocking his head back behind him, Kenan turned his attention to his twelve-year-old sister, Kyra.

"Oh, Kyra . . . dear sister . . . uh . . . scram!"

He shooed her away with a dismissive wave of his hand and fixed his gaze, once again, on the TV and its flickering images of the blood-sucking freak.

Kyra didn't budge. Well, that's not entirely true. Her eyelashes budged as she batted them lovingly up and down in Kel's direction. Kel was the cutest thing that Kyra had ever seen. This fact was relatively apparent by the way she was always walking around saying things like "Kel is the cutest thing that I've ever seen."

She clutched her little twelve-year-old hands coyly behind her back and swayed back and forth on her little twelve-year-old feet.

"Hi, Kel," she purred sweetly.

Kel's lip danced nervously above the small gap that had taken up residence between his two front teeth. "Uh . . . hi," he stammered nervously. He was always a little nervous around Kyra. That's because Kyra was always doing things like hugging him or kissing him on the cheek or jumping in his lap when he wasn't paying attention and then hugging him and kissing him on the cheek.

With a quick bounding leap, Kyra hopped over the couch, landed in Kel's lap with a thud, and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

"Ahhhhh! Kenan!" Kel wailed, "Kenan, your sister's choking me! Make her stop!"

"Kyra, would you let the boy go?"

"But he's so yummy," she explained, never once taking her gaze off Kel's yummy face.

"Well, first of all," Kenan responded scrunching his face up in disgust, "eeeeeewwwwwww! And, second of all, you have to let him go, we're trying to watch a Blood-Sucking Freaks movie marathon and it's far too scary for you. So go. Bye-bye now."

Kyra jutted her lower lip out in a sharp pout. "Fine." She unclenched her vicelike grip around Kel's neck, allowing him to suck in a relieved lungful of fresh air. She skipped her way over to the staircase and paused at the bottom.

"Bye, Kel," she said in a sweet singsongy voice, looking up expectantly for a reply.

Kel hunched forward on the couch for a closer view of the TV.

"Don't open the closet, man, the blood-sucking freak is in there." He shouted nervously at the television. "What are you doing? What are you doing? I said, don't open the closet." But it was no use. The guy on the TV didn't seem to be listening to him at all.

"I said, 'bye, Kel,'" Kyra shouted a little less sweetly this time. And when there was still no response, she turned and stomped her way loudly up the stairs.

On the TV, the guy pulled open the closet with an eerie creak. He peered into the darkened innards of the room. It looked empty, but . . . a loud animal snarl roared out from the darkness. The monster leapt out of hiding. It wasn't in the closet at all. It was behind him. The man tried to turn, but—

Kel shrieked and leapt into Kenan's lap. He tucked his head into his friend's shoulder, burying his face so as to not witness the monstrous carnage that was surely taking place on the television screen.

"Would you get off of me!" Kenan grumbled, swatting at Kel with his hands.

Just then, the front door swung open, Kenan's parents strolled in, hung up their coats, and . . . stopped cold.

"Kenan? What are you doing?" Roger intoned questioningly in his deep baritone voice.

"Is everything . . . okay?" Sheryl, Kenan's mom, asked.

Kenan stood up, dumping his friend off him into a scared little pile of fear on the carpet.

"Yeah, everything is okay," he assured his parents. "See, we're just watching the Blood-Sucking Freak movie marathon, and Kel here got a little scared."

"I told him not to open the closet door," Kel

whined, his voice trembling as he pulled himself slowly off the floor. He shook his head back and forth, trying to comprehend why the man on the TV wouldn't listen to him. "Why wouldn't he listen to me?! Why?!"

Kenan's mom cocked a hip out to one side. "Horror movies? You know, I don't know what you boys see in movies like that. They are so dumb!"

Roger seemed a little more excited. "Blood-Sucking Freaks," he boomed enthusiastically as he dashed into the room. "I love those movies!"

A wide, happy smile stretched out across Kenan's face. "Yeah, and tonight they're showing a bunch of them back to back. There's *Blood-Sucking Freaks,* then *Return of the Blood-Sucking Freaks, Bride of the Blood-Sucking Freaks,* and *Blood-Sucking Freaks Go West!"*

"Oh! I love that one!" Roger squealed with gleeful, childlike enthusiasm. "But you know which one my favorite is?"

"Dawn of the Disco-Dancing Freaks?!" Kel perked up enthusiastically.

Roger shook his bald head from side to side. "Nope. I like *Blood-Sucking Freaks Join the Circus* the best."

One side of Kenan's lip leapt up toward his

nose. What was his dad talking about? *Circus Freaks* didn't have nearly as much blood and gore as the other movies. It was lame, and Kenan didn't hesitate to say so.

"Lame?!" his dad asked in disbelief, cocking his head down toward his son.

"Lame!" Kenan insisted.

"Lame?" Roger asked again, sure that he must have misheard his son the first time. Everyone knew that *Circus Freaks* was the best of the series. After all, it had both freaks and the circus, and those two together equaled horror.

Kel poked a skinny finger out in front of him and jabbed it into the elder Rockmore's shoulder. "Man, don't you understand English?" he asked rudely. "Kenan said laaaammmmmmeeee!"

Roger's face flushed red from the heat of impending battle. He was prepared to defend the honor of *Circus Freaks* at any cost. But before he got the chance, Sheryl stepped up, hooked an arm around one of his, and dragged him toward her. "These movies are gonna give you boys nightmares!" she assured them with a motherly nod of her head. "Now come on, Roger, let's go to bed." And with that she dragged him out of the room and up the stairs.

"Shoot! Nightmares! Ha! That's ridiculous!

We are not scared of these movies, are we, Kel?"

Kel dismissed the entire notion of being scared with a short puff of breath and a sharp wave of his hand.

"Scared. Ha! There's nothing even a little bit scary about these movies," Kenan continued as Kel's eyes darted toward the screen to see what not-scary thing was happening in the movie. He stopped. His eyes burst open. His lip trembled in fear as he stared.

"NO! Don't go in there—ahhhhhhhhhh!" He ducked down, stuck his head under the couch cushion, and hid.

Kenan's room was about what you would expect from a seventeen-year-old boy. It wasn't clean. It wasn't pretty, it wasn't big, but what it was, at the moment, was bright. A bright overhead light cast a beaming yellow glow over the entire room. But apparently, that hadn't been enough. The lamp on the desk had also been switched on and then, because even that hadn't seemed quite bright enough, another lamp had been dragged in from downstairs and switched on as well. On top of that, just to be on the safe side, two large flashlights were clutched tightly in the two sweaty hands of Kenan and Kel. The

whole room glowed brightly, from the comic book collection that sat strewn in a corner to the sports posters that hung on the walls. Kenan climbed under the covers of his bed and yanked them up until only his eyes poked out from underneath. Outside the house, the glow from the room cast a yellow tint across the neighborhood sky.

Kel lay on top of his sleeping bag, wide-eyed, casting suspicious glances in all directions. "Well, good night," he offered halfheartedly as he jerked his head from side to side at the faintest sign of any noise.

"Yep!" Kenan's voice trembled slightly, and he fought to clear it. "I guess I'll just turn out the lights now . . . unless, of course, you want me to leave them on . . . for you . . . because I am perfectly happy with them off. I am. Not scared or anything."

"Uh . . . Kenan?" Kel asked nervously.

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared!" Kel whined, his voice high and frightened. "Why did you make me watch all the blood-sucking movies, Kenan?"

A small, secret smile danced across Kenan's boyish features. "Well then, for you we'll just leave that light on. But just for you. Okay?"

Kel chewed nervously on his lower lip. "Okay,

thanks, Kenan. Good night now," He continued to stare straight up at the ceiling, unblinking. So did Kenan. An hour later, they were still staring. Two hours later: still staring. Two hours and twenty-two minutes later, they had both finally drifted off to sleep.

Kel's eyeballs danced underneath his sleeping lids, almost like they had a horrible and frightening life of their own. His body twitched. He was dreaming something. But what?

CHAPTER TWO

The dark clouds rolled ominously over the face of the bright, full moon like a blanket being thrown over a lamp that happened to be floating in the sky. The night darkened. No stars were visible behind the cloudy cover of black that hung low and heavy over the city below. A storm was brewing.

Bright, fiery pitchforks of light exploded down from the heavens with an electric sizzle, casting ominous shadows across the small grocery store below.

Rigby's wasn't a fancy sort of grocery store, unless by fancy you meant small. A small deli counter sat against the far wall, quietly holding

its smallish display of cheese and ham and turkey and Churkham, a brand-new product that blended cheese and ham and turkey all together into one mushy, yellowish sort of loaf. Needless to say, the Churkham wasn't selling terribly well.

Across the rest of the store, cans and boxes and bags of food rumbled and danced their ways across the shelves as another reverberating volley of thunder vibrated across the night.

Several jumbo-sized cans of potted pork shook their way to the edge of the shelf. Then, just as another flash of lightning lit up the store, casting long and looming can-shadows across the walls, they tumbled off the shelf and plummeted toward the floor, where they were only barely spared the agony of certain can-death by landing on something soft just inches from the hard tile floor.

"OWWW! My foot!" Kenan raised his throbbing foot into the air as his features scrunched up into an expression of pain. He hopped up and down on his other foot, fighting to keep his balance. "Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow." He punctuated each hop as he bobbed up and down across the store. Suddenly, his foot landed on one of the downed cans of pork. The can shot out from under him.

His legs flew up off the ground, and for a brief

moment, Kenan hung, suspended in midair. Then the moment ended, and Kenan crashed back to the ground.

The throbbing pain in Kenan's foot was momentarily replaced by the throbbing pain that was now occupying the rest of his body. He lay still on the cool floor of the grocery as he tried to figure out exactly what bad thing he had ever done to a can of pork to deserve this.

A series of images dashed across his dazed mind with machine gun rapidity. He and Kel on the roof of the store talking about how much they hated canned pork. The two of them setting up a pyramid of pork cans in the store and then bowling them over with a cantaloupe. And, of course, there was the time when, for no good reason, Kenan had knocked over an entire shelf full of canned pork products, just for his own enjoyment.

All right, fine! he thought to himself, *I guess I did deserve this.* He craned his head to one side and glared across the store to where the cans lay. He could have sworn that he heard one of the cans laugh. And the other one definitely appeared to be gloating in its silent, canlike way. "That does it, cans," Kenan stated. "We're even."

Slowly, he pulled himself to his feet and dusted himself off. "Hey, Kel? Did you see that, with

the can and—" He cocked his head from one side to the other as he searched for his best friend, but there was no Kel. Kenan squinted an eye up suspiciously and glanced around the small store one more time. There were eggs. There was milk. There were even boxes of Google Puffs, which were guaranteed to have over four times the sugar of any other breakfast cereal. What the store didn't seem to have was Kel.

"Well, that's strange," Kenan mumbled to himself. Kel had been standing right next to him just a few minutes ago. Kenan was sure of it. He furrowed his brow as he tried to recall exactly what had happened.

Kenan had been busy stocking the freezer section with a brand-new shipment of liver-flavored ice cream when the first flashes of lightning had lit up the store. Kenan remembered that because it was just at that moment that Chris had stepped out of the back room and said, in a strange and ominous voice, that he needed Kel to come back and help him with an experiment that he had been working on.

Kenan smiled. *That's right,* he remembered, *Kel went back to help out Chris.* And then another thought entered his head. *Strange that he's not back yet.*

• • •

Chris Potter was Kenan's boss at the store. In the years that Kenan had been working for him, Chris had become almost like a part of his family, like a really goofy uncle or an aunt that happened to look like a man. He was kind. He was generous. He was, at this particular moment, wearing a surgical mask and hunching over a human-body–like shape that lay, covered in sheets, across a metal table in front of him.

Flashes of light exploded across the back room of the store as another volley of lightning erupted outside. The light illuminated Chris's eyes as they stared out from behind the thin paper of the mask, which covered his face from his prominent nose down to his considerably less prominent chin. His eyes were wide and wild, like the eyes of a crazy person, or a mad scientist, or a normal guy who had really crazy-looking eyes.

Webs of wires wound their way from the covered body on the table to a row of blinking instrument panels that were set up in one corner of the room. Bubbling liquids of an eerie green color boiled and danced in large test tubes. Knobs and dials and buttons and switches littered the mechanical surface of the large, refrigerator-size devices. A long, thick metal cord stretched its way from the top of the scien-

tific apparatus all the way to the ceiling of the room, where it disappeared through a small hole.

Outside, on the rain-soaked roof of Rigby's, the metal wire emerged again, serpentined its way across the shingles, and, finally, connected to a large metal pole that stuck up into the stormy night as if to say, "Hey, lightning, come and get me!"

Kenan, of course, did not suspect any of this. Which would explain why he stopped and stared with understandable surprise when he pushed his way only a few seconds later through the swinging door that connected the back room to the rest of the store.

His eyes shot open wide. His mouth pursed up into a what-the-heck-is-going-on-back-here kind of expression. The back room of the store, which until now had always served as a kind of makeshift office/storeroom, looked like something out of a horror movie. Kenan reacted to the vision with his ordinary calm and wit.

"What the— With the— And the—!!!" he babbled loudly.

Chris's head jerked quickly toward the door to check out the disturbance. Lightning flashed, crackling across his wild eyes and the mound of wild hair that stuck up off his head, as if he had woken up from a hard night's sleep and then

emptied an entire can of hairspray onto his head to make sure that his hair would remain cemented in that exact state of muss.

"Who's there?" Chris asked, a crazed, nervous whine echoing in his voice.

"Uhhhh . . ." Kenan stammered, "just me. Kenan. You know, the guy you're staring at with that crazy expression on your face."

"What are you doing back here?" Chris slowly approached his nervous employee. His long, thin shadow began to creep its way up Kenan's shoes.

Kenan's eyes began to flutter up and down with a frightened life of their own. "Ah, you know," he tried to explain, "just looking for Kel, 'cause he was supposed to come back here to help you with some experiment or something."

Chris covered the remaining distance between them with cheetahlike quickness. His nose brushed Kenan's face as his paranoid eyes glared out at him.

"What experiment?! What do you know?" he spat out quickly.

Kenan's hands jerked and fluttered in the air beside him, trying to help him form a coherent sentence. "Uh . . . nothing. Experiment?" he said to himself. "What experiment?" Kenan chuckled nervously, never taking his gaze off the

jittery, crazed face of his boss, who stood before him.

"You know what?" Kenan continued, "I can see that you're real busy right now with the mad scientist thing. So, why don't I just, you know . . ."—he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder to the store beyond—". . . go. And I'll come back later when you're finished with all of your . . . evil experiments and stuff. So . . . see ya!"

With that, Kenan turned and bolted for the door.

BOOOOOMMMMMM!! A huge clap of thunder rocked the store, followed immediately by a white-hot bolt of lightning, which burst out of the clouds, illuminating the night in a noontime glow. The lightning bolt smashed into the tall metal pole on Rigby's roof with a metallic crash. Sparks exploded into the air and rained back down to earth like the remnants of a really poor fireworks display.

The pole began to hum with a life of its own. A blue glow lit up the metal and began to travel from the tip of the pole to the base. The glow zipped its way across the wire that lay strewn out across the roof. It ran down the little hole, darted into the back room, and dashed into the large banks of machines that lined the wall.

The machines leapt to life. Panels lit up. Colored lights began to blink on and off wildly. Gauges with arrows began gauging. The room filled with an electric hum.

Kenan froze at the door and slowly turned back around to witness the spectacle. His mouth parted slightly as he took in the happenings in mute wonder.

Chris backed up slightly. "Oh, Kenan, would you excuse me for just a moment?" he said politely.

Kenan wasn't sure how to respond, so he took a guess. "Uh . . . yeah . . . sure?"

"Thank you." Chris slowly turned away from Kenan, and then, like a giddy schoolgirl with a new toy, he dashed over to his machine. His hand shot out and clutched the large dial that occupied the center of the machine. With a quick glance at the shape on the table, Chris began to turn the dial. He cranked it up past the marking that read Sort of Evil, past Pretty Evil, even past Really Evil. The machine began to rumble loudly and shake from side to side like a washing machine that had been filled with rocks. Still Chris kept turning the knob. Really, Really Evil got passed by, as did Amazingly Evil. Finally, the knob came to a stop. It had turned as far as it could turn. The words etched above it read *Mind-bendingly Evil.*

A small, wicked smile crept up Chris's face beneath the mask. The machine began to rattle violently. It looked like it was going to shake itself apart.

Chris placed both of his hands on a large metal switch that stuck off the side of the rattling contraption and pulled. The switch didn't budge. He leaned into it again, and, grunting, he yanked at the switch with all his might. Unfortunately, Chris was never really known as a strong man, and all his might wasn't quite enough to pull the switch.

He mumbled under his breath at his bad luck, and then shrugged. There was only one thing he could do.

"Uh, Kenan? Do you think you could give me a hand with this switch here? I would really appreciate it."

Kenan was watching the whole scene through narrowed eyes. He couldn't quite figure out what it was, but something was definitely not right. Was it Chris's deranged demeanor? The odd machines that were set up all over the room? The body under the blanket on the table? Or maybe a combination of all of them? Whatever it was, something was definitely wrong. Or maybe it was just his imagination.

"Sure, I'll give you a hand," Kenan replied

with a friendly nod of his head. He joined Chris by the machine, put his hands on the switch with his boss's hands, and, on the count of three, they yanked.

The switch crashed down, throwing sparks into the air like caps at a graduation. The machine spat a brilliant red glow across a series of wires that ran over to the shape on the table.

The sheet began to glow red as the life from the wire flowed into the shape under it. It grew brighter and brighter until Kenan had to shield his eyes with his hand to protect them from the glow. Chris, however, didn't bother covering his eyes. He absently ripped the paper mask off his face and stepped over to the table as he stared, wide-eyed, at the glowing form beneath the sheets.

"It worked. It worked," he began mumbling to himself softly, almost under his breath, and then louder. "It worked." And louder still, he repeated it, until he was shouting at the top of his lungs.

Kenan poked a quizzical finger into the air.

"Uh . . . what worked?" he asked with a wince. He really, really hoped that he wasn't going to regret asking that question.

The machines against the wall faded to a halt. The glowing body under the sheets began to

fade like the picture on a TV set that has just been switched off.

"This," Chris announced dramatically, "is what worked!" He grabbed a corner of the sheet and, like a magician, yanked it off the table, revealing . . .

"Kel?" Kenan asked, blinking several times out of sheer curiosity. The thing on the table looked like Kel. Well, sort of. Kenan didn't remember Kel having any large metal bolts sticking out of the sides of his head or being seven feet tall. He also didn't remember Kel having quite so many scars crisscrossing his thin, angular face. But other than that, it looked a lot like Kel.

"Chris, what's Kel doing on the table there?"

"This is no longer Kel!" Chris answered, his voice high and feverishly excited as he paced around the table, never taking his eyes off the Kel-thing that lay there. "Kel no longer exists. I've used his body to create an evil supercreature. This is Fran-Kel-Stein!"

"Clever name," Kenan admitted with a shrug.

"With this superstrong creature that will do my bidding, I can take over the world!" A loud, whiny cackle erupted from Chris's thin lips. He threw his head skyward, hands stretched wildly over his head as he laughed the laugh of the mad.

"Man, you're crazy!" Kenan summed up accurately.

The Kel monster twitched, and both Chris and Kenan stopped what they were doing and stared at it. Its finger moved. Then its arm. Then its eyebrow. Then, suddenly, in one fluid motion, it sat up!

"Orange soda," Fran-Kel-Stein moaned, his voice low and thick.

"It speaks," Chris hissed.

Kenan shot him a look across the room. "Oh, really?" he asked, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Thanks for filling me in there, buddy, 'cause I sure couldn't have figured that out on my own."

With lurching, jerking movements, the creature stood.

"Orange soda!" he moaned, louder this time.

"Chris, I think maybe you oughtta get my friend here some orange soda."

Chris's eyes scoured the room, then popped open wide with realization. "I think we're out," he squeaked.

The creature growled a loud, monstrous growl of rage! "Must smash . . . need orange soda!" The walls shook. Kenan threw his hands over his ears as the angry bellow roared across the room.

Frank-Kel-Stein's mouth twisted downwards in an awkward, gap-toothed frown. Then he

stormed forward, jerking his feet one after the other in a kind of demented, lurching shuffle. He charged right at the wall and burst straight through with a crash.

Bits of plaster dust rained down through the large Kel-shaped hole. Kenan and Chris just stared in silent wonder as the angry creature that was once a goofy kid disappeared into the dark and rainy night.

A series of lightning flashes illuminated him once, and then he was gone.

Silence hung over the store. No one said anything. Then, after a moment, Chris broke the silence with a thoughtful shrug.

"Hmmm. Creating a superstrong evil Kel monster seemed like such a good idea at the time."

CHAPTER THREE

The rain slowed to a steady drizzle, falling like small gobs of spit from the cloudy sky above. Small puddles of rainwater gathered in tiny potholes, which marked the road like pepperonis across a cement pizza. Droplets of water sent little circular waves rippling out to the edges of the puddles as they landed. The dark, cloudy night shimmered and danced in the reflections as the raindrops skipped over the surface of the water.

Suddenly one reflection went dark. A foot hovered over the small puddle, blacking out the night. Then, the foot stomped down. Water splashed up out of the pothole as the foot sunk ankle deep, soaking the canvas of the shoe. The

foot didn't seem to care in the least. The leg that was attached to the foot didn't seem to care in the least. Even the metal bolts that stuck out of the neck that sat above the torso that was attached to the legs didn't seem to care.

"Orange soda, sweet orangey goodness . . . no, not goodness, evil!" Fran-Kel-Stein moaned, his arms stretched out in front of him like a sleepwalker as he lumbered down the street, sloshing through puddles as he went about his monstery way. "Orange soda!"

Life had recently gotten very strange for Kel. When he woke up this morning he assumed it would just be a regular day. You know, hang out with Kenan, get into some trouble, drink some orange soda, and see what new foods he could fit into his nose. The idea that he would be abducted by Kenan's boss, strapped to a table, and turned into a superstrong monster never even crossed his mind.

But something else had happened to him in the transformation. Something unexpected. Not only had Chris's experiment magnified his strength to a level rivaling that of professional wrestlers but it also had had the unforeseen effect of magnifying his desire for orange soda.

Kel had always loved orange soda. In fact, he had once even looked into the option of marry-

ing orange soda (he couldn't). He loved drinking orange soda. He loved staring at orange soda. He even loved the words *orange* and *soda*. But now that love had become something more. Something deeper. Something darker. Something . . . oranger. Now, he didn't just want orange soda, he needed orange soda. It was all he could think about. It was all that consumed his monstery brain. Even the small gap in his monstery teeth seemed to shout out for the sweet, syrupy goodness of a nice cool orange beverage.

A small dog wandered across the street, the black pads of its paws pattering over the pavement like some very quiet drum solo. A small black nose flared wildly as it sniffed the road, searching the air for the scent of a nice fire hydrant or bone or New York strip steak that someone may have accidentally left lying around the deserted street. Suddenly the dog stopped. Two small cold nostrils flared. There was a strange smell in the air. A wet, monstery, gap-toothed smell. The dog cocked its furry head up into the air. Its two furry dog eyes shot open wide as the large lumbering smell reached down and picked it up.

Kel held the small furry dog in his grasp and stared at it. "Orange soda?" he asked questioningly as he turned the small furry creature

around to look at it from all angles. He sniffed it. It didn't smell like orange soda.

The dog sniffed him back. He didn't smell like a fire hydrant.

A scarred and discolored tongue poked its way out of the Kel-thing's mouth and proceeded to lick the dog. It didn't taste like orange soda. In fact, he was pretty certain that orange soda had never left any sort of hairy remains in his mouth after drinking it.

Orange soda bottles, as best as he could remember, also didn't lick you back, which made it all that much more odd when the furry thing in his hands began doing just that. Kel tried to wrap his new, monstery brain around this complex puzzle. The thing in his hand walked on its own, it was furry, it wasn't orange, it didn't contain any liquid, and it licked back. So, could it really be orange soda?

Fran-Kel-Stein raised a large finger up to his chin and scratched thoughtfully as he wrestled with the question. Lines of concentration criss-crossed the lines of monstery scars that marked his forehead. As monsters go, he wasn't that bright.

Then the thing in his hands barked. That clinched it. It was definitely not orange soda.

With a self-satisfied smile etched across his

face, the Kel monster set the dog down and went on with his search. Holding his hands out toward the night, he shuffled off into the distance, moaning to nobody in particular, "Orange soda."

A row of street lamps burned through the night, casting wan pools of yellow across the sidewalk below. A row of houses lined either side of the small street, which ended in a cul-de-sac. The houses all looked pretty much the same. Same sloped roofs. Same large garage that spread itself across most of the front of the house. Same large picture window that looked out from the living room to the quiet street beyond. Even the same banners that hung quietly over the same front doors. The banners flapped gently in the night breeze, each one stamping the house with its own unique identity.

A pineapple flapped and flowed from the front of the pastel blue house. *Welcome* was embroidered across another in large, friendly red letters, which just happened to clash with the neon pink of the rest of the structure. A large bottle of orange soda swayed and rippled through the night as it hung proudly over the door of the bright orange house at the end of the street.

Theodore Knutson was very proud of what he did for a living. It was a job that his father had done, and his father before him, and Theodore had managed to carry on the proud family tradition with honor and dignity. Some men were astronauts, some were rocket scientists or brain surgeons. Theodore Knutson was an orange soda taster.

It was Theodore's job to taste each and every bottle of orange soda before it left the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory and made its orangey journey to thirsty bellies across the land. Theodore would take the smallest of sips from each one, swishing the orangey beverage around in his mouth to search for three key things. First, flavor. It was important that the soda not be too ripe or too sour. Theodore had to make sure that the Wavy Lion Orange Soda Company had achieved exactly the right balance between sugar, water, and artificial orange flavoring number seventeen.

The second thing that Theodore checked for was bubbliness. It was important that the soda be frisky enough to tickle his nose as he drank but not so bubbly that he ran the risk of having his stomach explode later on in the day.

The third and last thing that Theodore checked for was color. It had to be just the right

shade of orange. Not too apple red, not too lard yellow, but just right.

Yes, Theodore loved his job. After all, orange soda had paid for his house. Orange soda had paid for the braces on his kid's teeth, and when drinking too much orange soda had rotted those teeth right out, orange soda footed the bill to buy new teeth. That was why Theodore Knutson wore orange soda T-shirts and orange soda caps. And that was why he proudly flew the orange soda flag in front of his house.

The Kel monster stopped right in the center of one of the circular pools of light that was thrown across the ground by the tall streetlights looming up into the sky above. His eyes narrowed as he peered off into the distance. A glint caught the corner of his eyes, like a diamond sparkling in a pool of brown, or glitter that had been spilled across a round pile of dirt.

A smile brightened up his face. A small electric spark of joy shot out from the bolts in his neck. He had spotted that which he was searching for. His quest was at an end. He had found orange soda.

Fran-Kel-Stein stepped up to the front door of the Knutsons' bright orange abode. He looked up at the banner that flew above the

bright orange door. And with a loud, guttural, monstrous roar, he exclaimed, "Orange soda!" Then he turned the knob and pushed open the door.

"Man, I can't believe that you turned my best friend into a crazed superstrong monster that has to wander the land in search of orange soda! What were you thinking?" Kenan demanded as he paced back and forth across the dingy tile floor of Rigby's grocery.

Chris looked up apologetically from behind the magazine he was reading. A large headline stretched its way across the magazine's glossy front cover. It read, "How to Take Over the World and Still Have Time for You!"

"I'm sorry, Kenan," he stated in his flat, nasal voice. "I was only trying to use him as a mindless foot soldier in my scheme for world domination. How could I have known that it would turn out so badly?"

Kenan's brow furrowed. His dreadlocks stood up in concentration as he walked from one wall of the store to the other, then pivoted on his heel and marched back the other way. He had to figure out a way to find Kel before he hurt somebody, or before he got hurt, or before he did something really strange that made people

look at him and shake their heads and mumble "What's wrong with that boy?" under their breaths.

"Man, we gotta find him!" Kenan grumbled to himself. "But how? He could be anywhere."

Chris frowned. "If only Mother were here. She'd know what to do. Unfortunately, she's not back from that expedition to climb Mount Everest." A glazed, faraway look settled over Chris's eyes as he imagined his dear, blue-haired old mother ascending the majestic peak of the world's highest mountain and planting the Potter family flag into the snow to mark the achievement. It was a proud moment for Potters everywhere. A small tear welled up in one of Chris's eyes, and he quickly dabbed it away.

Kenan couldn't have cared less about Chris's mother. He couldn't have cared less about Mount Everest. And he certainly couldn't have cared less about any flag-planting or Potter family achievements. None of that stuff concerned him. What did concern him was finding the monstrous creature that had, until recently, been his goofy best friend.

Kenan wrung his hands together in front of him as his mind raced and sputtered and stopped to gasp for air before beginning to race

and sputter all over again in its desperate search for a plan.

Then it hit him. His eyes rifled open. His head jerked up as the weight of the idea smacked him right between the eyes like a ton of marshmallows that had been superglued to a ton of bricks. A finger shot its way excitedly into the air. "I got it! What is the one thing that Kel can't resist?" A devious, scheming, gleaming sort of grin broke out across Kenan's lips and raced its way up the sides of his cheeks. "Chris," he said, an excited chuckle lacing his voice, "I got a plan."

The house was dark and quiet. A digital clock hung in the long, narrow hallway, casting eerie, tinted shadows across the white walls. One of the shadows seemed to lurch forward in stumbling, staggering jerks of movement. The shadow crept its way down the hall and into the silent kitchen beyond.

Theodore Knutson couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, fighting desperately to try and get comfortable. He tried lying on his back, but that didn't work. He tried his side and his front and his other side, but none of them were comfortable. After that he began to get creative. He tried one leg twisted back underneath the other with both hands clutched across his chest. No

good. He tried tucking his head between his knees while wearing a top hat and humming a song, but he still couldn't fall asleep. He tossed again, throwing a leg across the length of the bed. Then, after one more fruitless and frustrating turn, he gave up.

I bet, he thought, *a nice glass of orange soda will do the trick.* Theodore Knutson had been wrong before. But never had he been quite so unarguably, totally, completely and without a doubt as wrong as he was right at that moment.

He stood, stretched his hands toward the ceiling, pulled a bright orange robe around his skinny pencil of a body, and tramped down the hallway toward the kitchen.

He didn't bother turning on a light—after all, he had lived in that house for ten years. He knew every in and out, every nook and cranny. He even knew the nooks and crannies of the nooks and crannies. He knew every smell, every noise—well, almost every noise. He didn't seem at all sure what the loud, strange gulping noise coming from his kitchen was.

He froze. Someone was in his house. He fought to keep his body under control and stay silent. But even his soft breathing sounded to him like someone had turned the volume of his lungs up to maximum. Fear ran across his body,

stuck its fingers in its ears, and wiggled them tauntingly at him. Fear was kind of mean that way. A small electric twinge raced up his spinal cord, reached the top of his head, and jumped off to try and go find a safer place to live.

But then something strange happened. The fear was still there, but something new was hanging out with it, chatting with it, befriending it. That something else was anger. After all, this was his house. And he, Theodore Knutson, orange soda taster number forty-one, was not about to stand idly by while someone ransacked or burgled or messed up his house.

Slowly his hand crept through the air. His fingertips grazed the wall, and he navigated through the darkness until he came to the plastic casing of the light switch.

He steeled his nerves but soon realized that it was too late; his nerves had all run away, so he steeled his liver instead. He sucked in a deep, quiet breath of air, and then, with one swift motion, he flipped the switch.

Light flooded the room, revealing the awful, gruesome sight to Theodore's eyes. He screamed, a loud bloodcurdling scream of someone who has just seen something awful, like a murder.

The monster also screamed, throwing his

hands up over his monstery eyes to protect them from the blinding, and surprisingly sudden, light. But the creature—with his purple hat and his metal bolts that poked out from his neck—wasn't the real horror. The real horror lay strewn across the room like the wreckage of a great and bloody battle. Battered, plastic warriors lay broken and beaten across the floor of the kitchen, their life essence dripping out in sticky pools of orange across the tile.

Theodore pulled his hands away from his wide and frightened eyes as they took in the full orange soda carnage that was spread out before him.

Crushed bottles and crumpled bottles and smashed bottles lay in tangled heaps across the room. Most had been drained completely, but some still had enough soda in them to fill the room with a strong, pungent soda smell. As the vision of horror filled the soda taster's eyes, he opened his mouth and screamed again. It was truly an awful sight, and besides, he wondered, *who's gonna clean all of this up?*

The monster was startled. He wasn't used to these bright lights and loud screams. And so, he did the one thing that a freakish monster could do: he ran . . . right through the kitchen wall. It took a moment before he realized that he had

just smashed his way into the bathroom, but when he did, he quickly smashed through another wall into the garage and then, finally, one more wall and he was outside.

His lips seemed to glow with the orange stain of guilt in the weak yellow lamps of the street.

He was confused. He had thoughts of evil things and yet he craved orange soda. His monster mind was racing, but it wasn't quite able to catch up to where his monster body had taken him. It was still back enjoying the moment when he pulled off the refrigerator door with a soft suctiony pop and saw the rows and rows of glorious, life-giving orange soda inside. His mind quickly ran through the part where he grabbed bottle after bottle of orange soda and sucked them down, and it barely made it to the part where he was startled by the bright light before a voice cried out in the night.

"Look at him. He's a monster!" a gray-haired old man shouted as he stepped out onto his driveway.

Theodore Knutson burst from his house, pulling his orange robe even tighter around him. "That thing!" he shouted with the rough and scared voice of someone who has come in contact with true evil and watched it drink orange soda. "He drank all my orange soda!"

A crowd began to form. Too many voices began to assault Fran-Kel-Stein's ears. Too many fingers began to point accusingly at him. Too many eyes glared in his direction.

"He's a freak!" a woman's voice shouted from the back of the growing circle of onlookers.

"He's after our orange soda! No one will be safe!" another, deeper voice cried out.

More shouts and jeers were spat out from the crowd as they began slowly closing in on Kel. But deep in the depths of his monstery mind, all the voices blurred into one low verbal mush. All the words jumbled together, except two. The only words that he could hear above the din were *orange soda. Orange soda. Orange soda.* He needed more. He was desperate for it. His head pounded and throbbed. Orange soda. Orange soda. Orange soda.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He threw his hands above his head menacingly and bellowed out a deep, growling, monstery roar of thirst, which shook the air as it rose to the heavens.

The crowd leapt back as one, suddenly frightened by the raging monster before them. It charged. Women and children dove out of the way as the fiendish terror that was Kel stormed by them, shoving his way through the masses of

people until he emerged on the other side. He stopped. The crowd lay hushed in terrible terror-ridden silence.

Slowly, the creature turned to face them, the small gap between its teeth just barely visible behind the orange-stained lips. "Excuse me," Kel said very politely, "but do any of you know which way the orange soda factory is?"

Theodore Knutson spoke up without thinking. "Sure, it's down that way," he answered, pointing off into the distance, "just off Route 9." Suddenly, he realized what he was saying and, more important, who he was saying it to. He caught himself midword and stopped. "I mean . . . uh . . . I don't know," he stammered not terribly convincingly and retreated back into the crowd.

"Thanks." Kel grinned toward the crowd, threw his head back, roared one more time, then stormed off toward Route 9.

"Darn," Theodore uttered from the back of the crowd as the phantom figure faded away into the distance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kenan's plan was simple. It was so simple, in fact, that he was almost surprised that he had thought of it. Usually, Kenan preferred much more complicated plans. The kind of plans that had a very good chance of not working out exactly as he hoped. It was much more of a challenge that way. But this one was simple. Perfect. There was no chance of anything going wrong.

His hand reached out and clutched the top railing of the tall chain-link fence that surrounded the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory. He strained his other hand up and wrapped his fingers around the bar. His body hung in the air, suspended ten feet over the ground below as his

feet dug for footholds in the wire mesh of the fence.

It made sense that if Kel had been turned into a hideous monster who had to quench his crazed orange thirst any way he could, he would eventually find his way here. And when he did, he would find Kenan here waiting for him. A smug little grin turned the corners of Kenan's lips up as he finally pulled himself up to the top of the fence. He hefted his frame over the top and slowly began to lower himself back down the other side.

Slip! BAM! His fingers lost their grip, and, with a quick expression of surprise darting across his friendly round features, Kenan plummeted to the ground below.

"Ooooff!" he commented dramatically as he crashed into the soft earth. His eyes narrowed up into tiny slits of pain as he added to no one in particular, "That really hurt."

"Here, Kenan, catch." Chris's voice drifted down from the top of the fence. Chris agreed to help Kenan. After all, it was Chris's fault Kel was now a monster. Kenan glanced up just in time to see Chris dropping his backpack down to him.

Kenan didn't have time to catch. He didn't have time to move. All he had time for, as the canvas bag dropped through the sky, growing steadily bigger and bigger in his vision, was to

mutter a very quick "Awww man" before the backpack landed right on his belly.

For such a simple plan, it was seeming awfully painful.

"There he is! Get him!" The gray-haired old lady pounded on the concrete sidewalk with the end of her thick black cane. "It's the monster." Her wrinkled old lips quivered with a mixture of fear and glee as her wrinkled old eyes stared off into the distance. "He stole my orange soda!"

She raised a withered old arm and stretched it off down the street toward the Kel-shaped shadow that was shuffling off into the distance.

The crowd of townsfolk paused just long enough to follow the old lady's finger down the street before they stormed off after the monster, screaming into the night.

Forty pairs of feet marched off down the rain-soaked street. Old men and young men, women of all ages, even a couple of dogs had all gathered together on this dark, wet evening for one purpose—to track down a monster and keep their fair city safe, or at least to keep their orange soda safe, but either way it was very important. And so they had left their homes in the dark of night, grabbed the nearest stick or shov-

el or lumpy pillow that would really hurt if you got hit with it, and headed off in search of a goofy, gap-toothed creature.

Bright, fiery torches were clutched in the townspeople's hands, casting a flickering red glow across the night in spite of the fact that the streets were plenty well lit by streetlights and the fact that no one carried torches except in horror movies.

Fran-Kel-Stein heard the crowd behind him. Heard their angry shouts. Heard their loud footsteps pounding the Chicago streets. Even heard when they got lost and had to stop and ask directions. But he didn't care about any of that. He was on a mission.

His super eyes squinted up tightly as they scanned the darkness ahead of him, searching and finally finding what he was looking for. A large, monstery grin spread out across his face. His brown eyes glazed over with joy.

Spread out before him was the Wavy Lion Orange Soda factory. Actually, spread out before him was a tall chain-link fence, but behind that chain-link fence lay the majesty of the world's largest and most brightly colored soda manufacturing plant.

Fran-Kel-Stein's whole hideously scarred body began to tingle with that special sort of ex-

citement that only evil, monstrous freaks of science can feel. Then, almost as if it had been planned for this exact moment, the soda plant behind him flickered to life. All the lights in all the buildings lit up at once. The giant fountain of orange soda that sat by the front entrance to welcome visitors and soak them in sticky orange soda sprang to life, spouting orange water high into the air. But more impressive than any of that, more impressive than the soda machine that began dispensing free orange soda to whoever wanted it, more impressive even than the ten-foot-tall plastic Wavy Lion mascot that sprang to life, wagging its lion tail back and forth like a frisky, plastic cat, was the soda factory's glorious and crowning achievement. The main building, which snapped into glowing orange life at just that moment, was shaped like a giant forty-story bottle of orange soda. Even the lights in the window had a warm glow of orange. By mandate of company policy, every lightbulb that burned in the "bottle building," as it was called, had to be an orange lightbulb. And, apart from driving up the rate of employee work-related insanity, the policy had been a rousing success. It was truly an amazing sight to behold.

The Kel monster grunted a surprised and

impressed-sounding grunt. After all, if there was one thing better than a bottle of orange soda, it was a twenty-story bottle of orange soda. And it was all his.

He grabbed the fence and, almost without effort, ripped an entire section out of the ground. His gaze locked onto the huge orange vision in the distance, and he hurriedly shuffled off toward it, dragging his feet through the grass of the compound as fast as his superstrong legs would carry him.

Kenan stood next to the main power switch for the entire complex, which he had just switched on. He watched as the factory sprang to life, lighting up like a ghost town that had been reclaimed by its ghosts.

He knew Kel would come here. Knew it in his gut. Deep down in his liver and his spleen, he was sure that his friend would seek out the one place that had always given him comfort . . . and soda. And so he knew that if he was going to trap him, it would have to be here.

That was the simple part of his plan. Now came the part that was slightly more complicated. How do you capture a creature with super strength and super vision and a super-powerful thirst?

Chris rushed into the room and came to a screeching halt in front of Kenan.

"Kenan, he's here," he brayed excitedly.

A soft nod was Kenan's only reply. Under his breath, almost silently, he added, "I know."

Kenan could almost feel his friend's presence. He knew the moment that Kel, or whatever it was that Kel had become, arrived at the soda factory. It was something in the air. An energy, a feeling . . . actually, it was more of a smell. Kel really needed to take a shower. He stunk.

Chris stared up at Kenan through tiny, expectant eyes. "What do we do now?" he asked, relieved to be free of the burden of mad scientisthood, if even for a little while.

Kenan's eyebrows skittered nervously across his forehead, and he fought for a moment to calm them down. "Uh . . . well . . . we," he started, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. He didn't. "We lure him to the bottle building and then we . . . drop a giant net on him." Kenan nodded to himself, bobbing his head up and down proudly at the plan he had just made up on the spot. "Yeah," he added with a little more confidence. "That's what we'll do. Chris," he stated, fixing his boss with a steely-eyed glare, "call in the choppers."

CHAPTER FIVE

Three sets of metal blades beat the night air with steady whoops as they spun in blinding circles on top of the helicopters, holding them aloft as they slid through the dark sky. Large spotlights blared out from the front of the helicopters, illuminating bright patches of the night in their pure white gaze.

The three helicopters swooped down low over the plant, white beams of light crisscrossing in front of them like swords in the sky. They buzzed low over the ground, gliding like large, ugly metallic birds until they reached the end of the property. Then, sailing up over the chain-link fence, they banked in a sharp turn and

headed back over the plant again. That was when they spotted him.

Feverish thoughts danced like elephants in tap shoes across Kel's scientifically altered brain. Questions that had never occurred to him before began occurring to him as the promise of orange soda loomed so invitingly in his near future—important questions like *Why am I here?* and *What is the meaning of life?* Then, since the answer to that was obviously orange soda, he moved on to other, more complicated thoughts like *I wonder what Kenan's parents are cooking for dinner tonight?* Another thought quickly leapt in to join the growing throng of thoughts that was building up inside his monstery head. That thought was this: *What are those bright lights in the sky?* That thought was quickly followed by this one: *Hey, I bet those lights are aliens from another planet that have come here to steal Earth's supply of orange soda.* A nervous twitch twittered across the corner of his eyes as he imagined the bright alien lights falling across the world's supply of orange soda and the aliens taking it back to their home world.

"You leave our orange soda alone!" he screamed to the bright circles lighting up the darkened ground.

Suddenly the beams illuminated him. He looked like the world's largest lightbulb as all three spotlights converged on Kel at once.

"We've got him in our sights," the helmeted helicopter pilot barked into the microphone. He peered out from behind the shaded visor that hid his eyes from the bright glare of the sun, or in this case, the slightly less bright glare of the moon. Actually, he just liked to wear them because they made him look cool and mysterious, but he would always tell people that it was to protect his eyes from whatever bright glare he could think of at the moment.

The radio that sat in the middle of a high-tech bank of gadgets and controls and buttons and switches crackled to life.

"Chopper one! Chopper one! This is Base." The voice was laced with static, but it seemed to sound a lot like Kenan's voice.

If you could have seen behind the helicopter pilot's sun visor, you would have seen a look of confusion rush across his young pilot face. "Base? Uh . . . I thought your name was Kenan," he said curiously into the microphone attached to his helmet. The headset microphone made him look a lot like an employee at a fast-food drive-through, except for the fact that the

pilot was less likely to end his sentences with "Would you like fries with that?"

"My name *is* Kenan!" Kenan's voice crackled across the airwaves, an irritated tone detectable behind the static. "Base is my code name."

The helmeted head of the pilot bobbed up and down slightly. "Oh! I get it. Your code name. Hey, what's my code name?" A small expectant grin broke out underneath his pilot's visor as visions of cool piloty code names danced across his head. Maybe he would be known as Viper or Rogue or Pumpkin Head, which was what his mother called him, probably because his head was orange and round and looked a lot like a pumpkin.

"Would you forget about your code name!" Kenan yelled through the radio. "Just drop the net before he gets away."

"Fine. You don't have to get snippy," the pilot sniffed. "I mean, is it really that hard to give me a code name?" he mumbled almost to himself.

"All right. You want a code name? Your code is Doofus. Now drop the net, Doofus!"

The pilot's face lit up. Doofus . . . not bad. With a proud nod of his head, he ordered the other two helicopters to move into drop formation.

The three metal whirlybirds slid into a single

file line in the sky. Doofus led the pack. After all, he was the only one with a code name.

Fran-Kel-Stein swung his arms around his head like he was trying to swat away an annoying gnat. "Leave the orange soda alone, you evil aliens. Go get your own!"

The first helicopter screamed down out of the sky like a demented hawk that was closing in on its prey. It swooped low over the Kel monster's head, and it released its payload.

A large net fell from the sky, like a meteor that was made out of rope and had a lot of holes in it. It landed on top of Fran-Kel-Stein, tangling him up in its crisscrossing twine mesh.

"Doofus to Base. Doofus to Base. Direct hit," the pilot acknowledged with the combined pride of a job well done and a cool code name.

Fran-Kel-Stein roared a loud, angry, evil roar of rage as the net fell across his head. He stuck his hands through the small holes in the net and yanked with all his super, evil strength. A large gaping hole tore into the side of the net, and Fran-Kel-Stein stepped through it, freeing himself.

He wasn't safe here on the ground. Something in the back of his altered mind told him that he was in danger. It was either something in the back of his mind or the fact that alien spaceships

kept sweeping down out of the sky to try and capture him and take him to their alien home world. Not to mention the large, torch-bearing crowd of townsfolk who had chased him all the way here with the sole purpose of stopping him and saving their precious supply of orange soda.

A second helicopter began its whooping descent toward Fran-Kel-Stein, its rotors cutting the air like giant eggbeaters that had been attached to the top of a very large toaster. But this time Fran-Kel-Stein was ready for it. He quickly darted out of the way as a second net fell toward him, landing in a discarded pile on the ground.

He had to get away. And, as far as he was concerned, there was only one place to go.

Kenan nervously chewed on the ends of his fingernails as he hunched over the small radio. He had good reason to be nervous. After all, his best friend had been turned into a monster and was now being chased by an angry mob that was set on destroying him. Kel's only chance of survival, not to mention getting turned back to normal, was for Kenan, Chris, and their crack team of helicopter pilots to capture him before the mob did. And on top of all that, it was a school night, and Kenan's parents were going to kill him for being out so late.

"Doofus to Base. Doofus to Base," the helicopter pilot's voice boomed from the radio.

"Base here."

"He got away. He's climbing the bottle building. We're going to try to knock him off."

Kenan's cheeks had begun to ache from the constant expression of worry that they had held for a record-breaking six hours. It didn't look like they were going to get a break anytime in the near future.

He grabbed the microphone and yanked it to his face. "Don't knock him off. You'll hurt him. Repeat, don't try and knock him off of the building."

A wave of static burst across the radio's small speaker. "Come again, Base." The voice barely broke through the loud crackling noise. "I didn't copy that."

Kenan clutched the microphone tighter in his hand.

"Kenan! Kel is climbing the bottle building!" Chris burst into the room, tripped over his own feet, and crashed right into the little wooden table that the radio sat on.

Kenan's eyes went wide as he watched the scene unfold before him, almost in slow motion. The table tipped over. The radio went flying. Chris hit the ground hard just seconds before the

radio hit the wall, even harder, and burst apart in a bright shower of sparks and broken plastic. Kenan's jaw dropped open, and he had to shove it back closed with the aid of one of his hands as he stared at the wreckage that was, until a moment ago, his only method of contacting the helicopters.

"Chris! You just broke my radio!" Kenan shrieked, rushing over to try and gather the smashed pieces of his radio, which lay in a small pile of wreckage on the floor. He turned the pieces over and over in his hands, trying to figure out how to piece them back together. But it was no use.

"Man!" he complained. "Now how am I gonna talk to the helicopters? They're going to try and knock Kel off of the building. I gotta stop them."

With a frantic air of panic hanging over him, Kenan turned and bolted out of the room, his short dreadlocks waving in the wind from the speed of his exit.

"Owwwwwwww!" Chris moaned, trying hard not to move his aching body. "I think I broke my pancreas!" he complained, not exactly sure what a pancreas was, but relatively certain that, like every other part of his body, it hurt.

• • •

The crowd had gathered around the shining orange base of the bottle building. They had chased the monster here to keep him from stealing their orange soda, and so it was only fitting that here, on top of a building that was shaped like orange soda, he should meet his end—even if that end didn't get to come at their hands but rather at the hands of helicopter pilots.

As the mob had chased him through the night, their numbers had swelled to almost a hundred people. Now they were all gathered together, waving torches and shovels and fists in the air, waiting to see how it would all end. Several of the onlookers shouted out inspirational words of wisdom to the chopper pilots circling above.

"Get the freak!" was one clever cry.

"Hurt him," came another helpful suggestion.

"Let him go!" another voice yelled.

The crowd stopped. Every head turned as one as they sought out the person who had yelled that. One hundred pairs of eyes came to rest on a friendly round face that was located in the middle of the crowd.

Kenan tried to force a smile as the crowd stared at him curiously.

"Heh-heh," he chuckled halfheartedly.

A tough-looking biker with a goatee that stretched down to somewhere just south of his knees stepped forward, rubbing his bald head with a thick, meaty hand. "Let him go?" he growled questioningly. "But he's a monster. He's different. And different is bad!"

The rest of the crowd murmured along in agreement.

Kenan cocked an eyebrow as he stared at the biker. "Yeah, but you're different too. I mean that long goatee. That's not normal."

The biker looked flustered. His eyes darted nervously from side to side, then when that got boring, they began darting nervously from top to bottom. "Uh . . . uh . . ." he stammered, "yes it is."

"No it's not," another voice rose out of the mass of people. A short lady with a three-foot beehive of a hairdo perched precariously on top of her long, thin face pushed her way through the crowd. "He's right." She rose a finger accusingly at the biker. "You are different. Come on, guys, let's get him!" she shouted.

The crowd, happy to finally have something to do other than sit and wait for an orange soda–drinking monster to fall off a building, happily leapt forward, lunging at the biker.

Kenan, sensing that the situation was fast get-

ting out of hand, leapt in front of the goateed guy.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" he held his hands out in front of him to try and calm the crowd. "That's not what I meant. It's okay that he's different. As a matter of fact," he turned his gaze to the short lady with the tall hair and eyed her up and down, "you're a little strange yourself."

"Get her!" a couple of people shouted, desperately hoping that at some point they would get to "get" someone.

"Nah!" Kenan snapped. "It's okay to be different. I mean, everybody's a little different. You know. Can't we all just get along?"

A hush fell over the crowd as Kenan's words sunk in. Silence reigned in the cool dark night. Then, just as quickly as the silence had come, it ended.

"No!!" the mass of townspeople resoundingly answered. They had finally come to the conclusion that, while it might be okay for them to be a little different, it certainly wasn't okay for Kel.

"Get the monster!" they shouted encouragingly at the helicopters, which buzzed around the bottle building.

Fran-Kel-Stein reached the top of the giant building and peered down at the small specks of

people gathered below. "Man, those townspeople sure are little," he thought to himself. "I bet I could fit them all in my nose."

He smiled to himself at the thought of his nostrils warmly packed with townspeople. His eyes scanned the night from his orangey perch. It was nice up there. Peaceful. No mad scientists experimenting on you. No townspeople chasing after you. Nowhere to go to the bathroom if you had to. That thought gave him a slight twinge. He had been drinking an awful lot of orange soda lately, and sooner or later—

His thoughts were interrupted by the loud roar of the helicopters' blades as they ripped through the sky overhead. Kel looked up at the three helicopters that had gathered above him. Before he had a chance to wonder what they were doing up there, they answered the question for him by diving right toward him.

The Kel monster threw himself to the side, rolling precariously close to the edge of the bottle-cap roof as the first chopper buzzed by, just feet from his head. He grunted an angry monster grunt and pulled himself to his feet, shaking his fists angrily into the air.

The second chopper began its dive, arcing through the night sky like a falling star. But Fran-Kel-Stein was ready for it. He hunched down,

waiting for it to pass overhead, then sprung back to his feet and swung his arm out, swatting the chopper as it passed. The helicopter rocked in the sky, stunned by the strength of Kel's monstery blow. It bobbed, swayed, and finally recovered.

Unfortunately, as Fran-Kel-Stein watched the second helicopter bob and weave wobblingly away, he forgot to take notice of helicopter number three.

It buzzed down right over his head, and the monster had no choice but to dive to the ground to avoid being hit. But this time, he was too close to the edge of the building. He tumbled over the side, shot an arm out, and just managed to grab on to the metal railing that ran its way around the outside of the roof. He dangled in midair, twenty stories above the ground, swinging back and forth in the wind as his monstery fingers clawed against the metal rail that was all that stood between him and plummeting to the ground below.

The crowd below watched, captivated by the sight, as the monster clung to the roof of the building by one hand. And then, the hand slipped.

"Keeeellllllll!" Kenan screamed as the creature began to fall.

• • •

Hey this is kinda fun, Kel thought to himself as the wind whipped around his falling body. Something was bothering him, though, some thought that nagged annoyingly at the back of his monster mind. Something about the ground and being smashed to pieces. He craned his head over his shoulder and, for the first time, looked down. *AHHHHH man!*

The ground rushed up to meet him, fast and furious and dirty. *Why me?*

Kel cleared his monstery throat and screamed.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-HHHHHHHHH!"

CHAPTER SIX

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" Kel shot up off of the floor like he had been launched from a cannon. He blinked. Then, just to make sure he had actually blinked the first time, he blinked again. Slowly his eyes began to focus. He didn't see any orange building spread out before him. In fact, it looked a lot like Kenan's bedroom.

Huh, that's odd, he thought as he stared, bleary-eyed, at the large poster of Skunkator, the world's smelliest superhero, which hung across the back of the bedroom door. *I don't seem to be falling any more.*

He glanced over at Kenan, who was lightly snoring away underneath the covers. Only the

top of his head stuck out to ensure that Kenan was, indeed, still there.

Slowly, Kel began to piece together what was going on. *Someone must have magically transported me to Kenan's bedroom before I hit the ground!* was the idea that was, so far, in the lead. Finally, and after far more thought than it should have taken, the idea dawned across Kel's handsome features that maybe . . . just maybe, the whole thing had been a bad dream.

"Whew. It was only a dream," he whispered to himself, as the rapid, terror-struck beating of his heart began to subside to a slightly less rapid pounding in his chest.

He sank back down to the sleeping bag that was spread out across the brown carpeting of the floor, lay back down, sighed a big relieved I'm-so-glad-I'm-not-plummeting-to-the-ground sort of sigh, closed his eyes, and drifted gently back off to sleep.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Kel plummeted down the side of the orange bottle building like a giant human cannonball that happened to be wearing a bright purple hat. *Awwww man, I ended up back in the same dream,* he complained to himself silently just

moments before he hit the ground with a loud, gap-toothed thud.

Kel wasn't the only one that was dreaming. Over in Kenan's bed, buried away under a protective layer of sheets, Kenan was tossing and turning. Low, incoherent mumbles escaped his lips. His hands clenched into fists, then released, then indecisively clenched into fists again. Suddenly, his eyes bolted open, staring up blankly at the back of his bright yellow sheets, which covered them.

He yanked the sheets down off his face and stood up. His short dreadlocks danced back and forth as he tossed his head from side to side to shake away the sleep. Yawning, he stretched his arms toward the ceiling.

"Man, that was a weird dream!" he muttered to himself with a sigh. He clutched a hand over his mouth as a yawn fought its way across his face. His wide brown eyes narrowed, then, as the yawn passed, they opened and stared out of the window into the night. An eyebrow climbed its way a little higher on Kenan's forehead. He cocked his head at a curious angle, then leaned forward and peered out the window again, a little closer this time. *That's odd,* he thought, looking at the clock, which read a

glowing neon 3:30 A.M. *There are people down there.*

There were people down there. Shadowy figures were moving around the Crams' house next door. It was a free country, after all, and if his neighbors, the Crams, wanted to roam around outside their house in the wee hours of the morning, there was nothing wrong with that. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling gnawing at his gut that it was strange. Kenan chewed thoughtfully on one corner of his lip as he stared at his neighbors. A guilty thought snuck its way into his brain. He shouldn't really be spying on them. *Aww, it's not really spying,* he reasoned. *After all, it's my window. I'm allowed to look out of it if I want to.* Nodding his head at the wisdom of his logic, Kenan pressed his face against the glass and went back to peering out into the night.

There was definitely someone down there. He could just make out shadowy figures, carrying shadowy things from a shadowy truck and lugging them toward the even shadowier door to the cellar.

"Aw, man!" Kenan complained to himself. "I can't see anything from here." A sly smile stole its way across his face. He turned and glanced across the room, his eyes seeking out the pair of

binoculars that sat on top of his dresser. A finger poked up to his lips and Kenan chewed on it thoughtfully as he debated fiercely with himself whether or not to use them. The debate went something like this.

Good Self: You shouldn't use those binoculars. That would be spying and spying is wrong.

Bad Self: Pipe down, wimp. We're using 'em and that's that!!

It wasn't a very long debate.

In a flash, Kenan bolted across the room, snatched the binoculars off the shelf, and sprinted back to the window, shoving the binoculars against his spying eyes.

Ah! That was better. Now he could see a little clearer. Magnified by the lens of the binoculars, Kenan could make out the darkened shapes of Mr. Cram and Mrs. Cram. They were helping some other guy that Kenan didn't recognize unload what looked like furniture from a big moving truck that sat in their driveway.

There was something odd about the other man, something that Kenan couldn't put his finger on. Something different. Maybe it was the fact that he was wearing a black cape, which flowed out behind him as he walked. *Hmmm, you don't see a lot of people wearing those.*

Must be a relative. Marc's whole family is weird.

Marc Cram had moved near by Kenan's family about a year ago. And in that time, he had quickly managed to become quite an annoyance to Kenan. It wasn't that Marc was mean, or rude, or snobby, or anything like that. What drove Kenan nuts was the way Marc was always . . . so nice. He was friendly and happy and helpful and a joy to be around. It was really irritating.

Kenan could have dealt with the fact that Marc was kind of a geek. With his slicked-back hair and coke-bottle glasses and his tendency to wear sweater vests a lot, even when it was warm out, Kenan had pegged Marc for a geek the first day he met him. But there was something different about Marc. Even though he dressed oddly, and even though he was really proud of his spelling ability, and even though he knew more about watches than a boy should, people seemed to genuinely like Marc. In fact, everybody liked Marc. That just drove Kenan nuts.

Suddenly, Kenan was broken out of his thoughts as the trio below dragged another object off the truck and dropped it to the ground with a loud thud.

Kenan jerked the binoculars back to his eyes

and peered down at the fallen object. It was a wooden box of some sort. It was kind of hard for him to make out exactly what it was because all the shadowy figures were huddled in front of it, obscuring it from view. Something had spilled out of the box when it fell, and, as best as Kenan could make out, it looked like dirt.

That's strange, he thought to himself as he sat up on the bed. *Why would they have a box that's filled with dirt?*

The figures down below turned the box back over and placed the wooden lid securely back on. Kenan's eyes shot out of his head, smacked into the binoculars, and bounced back into their sockets. His hair popped up and stood straight off his head, like it was standing at attention in some kind of military hair review. The box that the Crams were now casually carrying to the basement door of their quiet suburban house wasn't just an ordinary box—it was a coffin.

"Ap!" Kenan shrieked a short, high-pitched squeal. A coffin! And that strange guy that was with them was wearing a cape. Coffin plus cape could only equal one thing. Vampire.

"Kel, wake up! Wake up! Vampire! Vampire outside!" Kenan screeched in panic as he shook his friend from side to side, desperately trying to wake him up. "Awww, wake up!"

Kel flopped around in his sleeping bag under Kenan's high-strung shaking. A low, snorting snore sputtered out from between his lips. He didn't seem to be planning on waking up any time in the near future.

Clutching Kel's shoulders in his white-knuckled grasp, Kenan began yanking his friend violently up and down on the floor. But Kel still didn't wake up.

"Man, Kel. What is wrong with you?" he complained. And then, an idea hit him. "Kel, look, they're giving away free orange soda outside."

Kel's eyes burst open. He shot to his feet and, before Kenan could stop him, he rushed out of the door.

Why can't it ever be easy? Kenan wondered, shaking his head from side to side in dismay.

He waited as he heard Kel's footsteps rush down the stairs, waited as he heard the front door open and shut, and then waited some more as the front door reopened and the footsteps padded back up the stairs.

Kel burst through the door, panting and out of breath. "I must have missed them, Kenan, there's no one out there giving away orange soda anymore." He cocked a hand on his hip as he tried to regain his breath.

"Would you forget about that and come

here?" Kenan grabbed his friend by the shoulder and led him to the window. "Look." He shoved the binoculars in front of Kel's face and waited.

"Hey!" Kel shouted, waving his hand gleefully through the air.

Kenan's brow furrowed. "What the . . . give me that!" He snatched the glasses and peered through them to see what Kel was waving at.

There in front of him, standing over the coffin, standing next to the stranger in the cape, was Marc Cram. A smile that was far too friendly for Kenan's liking was plastered across his face. And his hand was slicing back and forth through the air in a way-too-friendly wave! They had been spotted.

Kenan thought quickly. He grabbed Kel and yanked him to the ground, hunching just underneath the sill of the window. "Uh-oh, Kel. He knows we're on to him. He saw us."

"No, he didn't, Kenan," Kel replied soothingly. He popped his head back up into the window and glanced down at the still waving form of Marc Cram below. Ducking back down next to Kenan, Kel amended his earlier statement. "Uh . . . yes, he did."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The bright morning sun climbed its way up into the sky, peering its way over lawns, across driveways, through windows, and into wide brown eyes that hadn't closed all night.

Kenan stared up at the ceiling without blinking. He had lain that way all night long, ever since his horrifying discovery about the Crams' new visitor. And especially ever since he was caught spying on the Crams. All night he had lain awake, waiting for the moment when the vampire would come to get him. Perhaps disguising himself as a bat, or a wolf, or a vacuum cleaner salesman who just wanted to come in to demonstrate the latest breakthrough in

vacuum technology. They were clever, those vampires. You never knew what shape they would take. Never knew how they would appear to you. All you could be certain of was the fact that eventually they would come. And when they did, you had better watch your neck.

"See, Kenan, I told you he wasn't a vampire," Kel stated matter-of-factly. He knew that vampires didn't exist. He was sure of it because he had once had a dream where Santa Claus and the Easter bunny had told him that vampires didn't exist. And if you couldn't trust them, who could you trust?

Kenan sat up in bed and glared over at his friend. "Then how do you explain the coffin and the cape and the fact that they were out there so late at night?" he demanded.

Kel thought about it long and hard. He was sure there had to be a good explanation for it all. Finally, he hit on it. It made perfect sense. "You know, Kenan, I bet he's a performer in the circus named Mr. Cape Guy who wears a cape and puts people in coffins and then makes them disappear . . . at night. See, it all makes perfect sense."

Kenan just stared at him. "What makes perfect sense is that he's a vampire. Oh, what are

we gonna do?" He hopped to his feet and began pacing nervously around the room.

"Kenan?" his mother's voice echoed across the room as she called from downstairs. "Marc Cram's here. Why don't you come down and say hi."

Kenan stopped in midpace. His foot hovered inches above the ground. His gut rumbled a frightened sort of rumble—or was it just hunger? It was hard to tell.

"Uh-oh," he muttered. "Marc Cram's here."

"Cool!" Kel leapt up and sprinted down the stairs.

Kenan ground his teeth together and winced. Then, with a big, resigned sigh, he put his foot down and headed out of the room.

"Kel!" Marc cried a loud, friendly greeting. He rushed over to Kel and wrapped his arms around him in a warm, brotherly hug. Marc seemed to have more energy than a normal person ought to. He almost seemed like he just might explode, if he ever stopped moving. Apparently not wanting to test that theory, Marc had never stopped moving. As he stood, giving Kel a warm hug of greeting, he bounded back and forth from one foot to the other.

"Hey, Marc!" Kel shouted back, a little louder

than necessary, since they were only standing a few inches apart.

"Kenan!!" Marc released Kel and rushed over toward Kenan with his arms outstretched. It was only one of the many things about Marc that annoyed Kenan.

"Don't even think about hugging me," Kenan stated flatly, as he descended the last few stairs that led into the living room.

Marc's eyes gleamed with joy from behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "Oh, silly!" his voice rose on the end of the word and he held it, dragging it out far longer than Kenan would have liked. And then, when he finally had to pause for breath, he went ahead and wrapped his arms around Kenan anyway.

"All right! All right!" Kenan shrugged his overly enthusiastic neighbor off him and straightened his clothes out with a sweep of his hands. "What do you want?"

"Hey!" Marc swung his hands wildly at his sides, "I sure hope we didn't keep you up last night. We were helping my uncle move in. He's gonna be staying with us for a little while."

Kenan perked up with interest. "I see. So that was your uncle then, last night, with the . . ." He paused, hoping to trick Marc into filling in the word *coffin*.

"Furniture," Marc nodded, poking his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose with a jab of his finger. "Yeah, I told him all about you two. He really wants to meet you."

Kenan swallowed hard. "He does!" His voice cracked and squeaked as he said it. He cleared his throat with a quick hacking cough. "I mean, he does," he said again, a little more normally this time.

"Yeah. In fact, that's why I came over. I wanted to invite you and Kel over to dinner tonight. Any time after dark will be fine."

"After dark?" Kenan asked curiously. "Why can't we go and meet your uncle right now?"

"He's asleep. He always sleeps during the day. He's a real night owl."

"R-r-r-really?" Kenan stammered nervously as his worst fear became confirmed.

"Yeah," Marc replied. "So, can you guys come tonight?"

Kenan's mind raced for a quick yet believable explanation for why they couldn't attend. Kenan briefly considered telling Marc that they couldn't go because he didn't want Marc's vampire uncle to bite his neck, but he decided against it. *Too obvious,* he concluded. *Wait a minute. I could tell him that me and Kel got*

recruited by a supersecret government agency and we have to—

"Yeah, we'll definitely be there," Kel answered with a grin.

"Kel!" Daggers shot from Kenan's eyes as he glared at Kel. At least they would have shot from his eyes if that weren't entirely impossible.

"Great, see you guys then!" With an excited salute to his two friends, Marc Cram spun and dashed out of the room.

"Kel! Why did you say that we would go over there?" Kenan snapped as soon as the door shut behind Marc.

"I don't know," Kel shrugged, "it sounded like fun."

Kenan's head began to tremble. "Fun!" he shouted. "Fun?! Kel, the man's uncle is a vampire. And now we have to go over and have dinner with him."

A short, disbelieving puff of air snorted out from Kel's lips. "Kenan, he is not a vampire. I mean just because he sleeps in a coffin, wears a cape, and never comes out during the day. That doesn't mean anything."

"Yes it does! It means that he's a vampire. Just wait till tonight. You'll see."

• • •

The sunset painted the sky with fiery strokes of red and brilliant dabs of orange. Bright specks of stars began to dot the heavens as the sun dropped lower on the horizon like a giant blazing ship that was quickly sinking into the earth. The orange sky shimmered and shifted, changing color to a brilliant purple hue, as if someone had spilled a basketful of blueberries in the sky and then set about trampling them. Finally, all the color drained from the firmament and the black night settled round.

"Kenan? You stink." Kel's nostrils sucked in a quick breath of air and winced at the sharp, stinging smell that joined it. "You smell like a skunk that never showers, or a monkey that's carrying a skunk that never showers."

Kenan beamed proudly at the mention of his stench. He reached into his shirt and pulled out a long rope necklace that was covered with large hunks of some cheeselike substance.

"I'm wearing Limburger cheese around my neck. Let's see the vampire come and bite me now."

Kel's face scrunched up, partly in curiosity and partly from the foul, rotten smell that was assaulting his nose.

"But I thought that it was garlic that vampires couldn't stand."

"Well . . . yeah, it is," Kenan grudgingly acknowledged, "but I couldn't find any garlic. This stuff was the smelliest stuff I could find." He sniffed it once more for good measure, gagged, and, with a pleased nod of his head, stuffed the makeshift necklace back down his shirt.

Knock! Knock! Knock! Kenan rapped lightly on the Crams' front door with his knuckles.

"Welp! Guess they're not home. Let's go!"

He spun around and started to walk off when the door creaked open.

"Kenan! Kel!" Mark greeted them eagerly and showed them in to his house. He led them to the large, formal dining room, which was occupied by a long rectangular wooden table. Already seated at the table were Marc's parents. There, at the very end of the long table, was his uncle.

"Uncle Vlad, these are my friends Kenan and Kel."

Vlad stood, his black cape billowing behind him like an eerie shadow. His jet black hair was slicked back off his head, coming to a point in a widow's peak right in the middle of his forehead. His skin was pasty white, and Kenan couldn't resist the urge to comment on it.

"You're a little pale there, aren't you? What's the matter, never get out in the sun?" He eyed Vlad suspiciously as he waited for an answer.

"Vell," he said, his deep voice laced with a thick accent. "In Transylvania where I'm from, there aren't a lot of beaches."

"T-t-t-transylvania, you say?" Kenan stuttered nervously.

"Is that in Florida?" Kel asked.

"No!" Everyone at the table answered him at once.

Mrs. Cram's mouth turned down in distaste. "Eeeewww, what is that smell?"

Mr. Cram clutched his nose and nodded along in agreement.

"Uh . . . I don't smell anything," Kenan bluffed as he pulled out a chair to Vlad's left. "So, let's eat!"

The Crams exchanged curious looks. "Uh . . . okay." Mrs. Cram got up and returned a moment later with a silver covered tray. "Tonight, we're having Uncle Vlad's favorite meal." She removed the cover from the dish. Beneath it, sitting on a silver plate, were six bloody, raw pieces of meat. "Raw meat!" she exclaimed as excitedly as if she had just said, "Chocolate ice cream!"

Kenan jabbed an elbow into Kel's ribs as Kel took the chair next to him. "See Kel, vampire."

Kel rolled his eyes. "Come on, Kenan. That doesn't prove anything."

"Excuse me," Kenan poked a quizzical finger into the air, "but do you have any garlic to go with this? You know, there's nothing I love more on raw meat than a little garlic, don't you agree . . . Vlad?" Kenan snapped his head over to face Marc's cape-clad uncle. He was a little disconcerted to find that Vlad was already staring at him. At his neck, to be exact. His long tongue flicked out hungrily and wiped at his bloodred lips. "Actually," he answered, "I'm not that fond of garlic."

"Oh, really?" Kenan turned back to Kel with an I-told-you-so look.

"What are you looking at me like that for, Kenan?" Kel asked.

Kenan gritted his teeth. "Because . . . that's why."

Kel's face lit up like someone had switched on the world's dimmest lamp. "Ohhh, I know, you're looking at me like that because you think that proves that Vlad's a vampire."

Kenan shook his head nervously from side to side. He drew his hand across his neck in the international symbol for be quiet.

Marc smiled a broad, goofy smile, revealing the slight crook in his front teeth. "A vampire, silly, why would you think that?"

"Oh . . . no reason . . . don't know what

Kel's talking about. Heh-heh." Kenan laughed nervously, flicking his eyes to the side to catch Vlad out of the corner of his sight. Was it just his imagination, or were Marc's uncle's eyes red?

Those red eyes continued to bore into Kenan's neck, and he started to squirm nervously in his chair as he fought to ease the tight, nervous feeling that had gripped his guts and was currently spinning them around like a lasso.

As Kenan tried to force down some of the raw meat on his plate, he started getting an odd sensation. A warm feeling on his neck. He jerked his head to the side and screamed. Vlad was just inches away, his long pointy fangs bared and pointed at Kenan's neck.

"Ahhhh!" Kenan jumped. "What do you think you're doing?"

Uncle Vlad froze, nervous. "Uhhhh," he stammered through his thick accent. "Nothing."

Kenan slid his chair back and stood. "Nothing? Nothing?" he asked in disbelief. "You were gonna bite my neck, weren't you?"

"No," Vlad answered meekly.

"Did you see that, Kel? I told you he was a vampire. He was gonna bite my neck."

Kel looked at his friend through skeptical

eyes. "No he wasn't, Kenan, that was just your imagination."

"My imagination!" he shrieked. "Look, the man's got fangs!!"

Vlad quickly yanked his lip back down over his razor-sharp teeth. "No, I don't," he said as innocently as he could.

The Crams all murmured along with him, spouting things like "You're just confused," and "Vampires don't really exist," and "I vant to suck your blood." Actually, it was Vlad who said that last one.

Kenan had had enough. Even if no one would believe him, he knew what he knew. And what he knew was that "Uncle Vlad," if that was his real name, was a real live (or not live as the case may be) coffin-dwelling, fang-having, blood-sucking vampire. And he didn't need to hang around here any longer to prove it.

"Come on, Kel. We're leaving."

"But I haven't finished my raw beef yet," Kel protested. But Kenan wasn't listening—he was marching straight toward the front door, and he wasn't looking back. It was too bad, really, that he didn't look back, because if he had he would have seen Uncle Vlad transform into a bat amid a giant puff of smoke. He would have seen the furry little flying bat flap its long, thin wings as it

buzzed around the dinner table, its small, sharp bat fangs bared. Then he would have seen it lock on to his neck with its bat sonar and fly straight toward him.

But Kenan didn't see any of those things. He had no idea that a small vampire bat was flying after him, gaining on him, its teeth bared and ready to suck some serious blood. Kenan swung the door of the Crams' house aside, marched through, and, with a swing of his arm, slammed it shut again.

THUD! The bat smacked right into the door and dropped to the ground in a pile of wings and fur. A flash of smoke erupted, and when it cleared, Vlad was again standing there, right by the door. He wobbled slightly on his feet and rubbed the small knot that was growing on his forehead. "Oooohhh, that really hurt," he moaned painfully. And then, his life got worse.

The door swung back open, smacking Vlad right in the face and pinning him against the wall behind him.

"Come on, Kel!" Kenan barked from the doorway.

Kel shoved one last piece of raw beef into his mouth, quickly thanked the Crams for dinner, and headed off after his friend.

Once again the door slammed after them. Vlad's red beady eyes crossed, he stumbled a few feet from the door, and then he dropped to the ground with a thud.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Strange things started happening. As the weeks passed, everyone in town started acting weirdly. First, Chris decided to only open Rigby's from dusk till dawn. That seemed odd, but not nearly as odd as the fact that he changed the name of the store from Rigby's Grocery Store to Rigby's Vampire Grocery and Blood Bank. That, and the fact that he seemed even paler than usual and took to wearing a cape around the store made Kenan very, very suspicious. Kel, on the other hand, chalked it up to coincidence.

But Chris wasn't the only one acting weird. The whole town seemed to be under the vam-

pire spell. But no matter how much Kenan pointed it out to people, no matter how obvious it became, no one would listen to him. No one listened when the school decided to not start classes until after dark. No one listened when all the movies at the local movie theater were vampire movies, and no one listened when the city council voted unanimously at one of their new midnight meetings to change the name of the city from Chicago to Vampireville.

Maybe it's just me, Kenan thought, *maybe I am just losing my mind, but all that stuff does seem really strange.*

The midafternoon sun shone brightly down upon the town as Kenan and Kel strolled the empty streets. They passed rows and rows of empty storefronts, all bearing signs that said Open After Dark. The Blood-Sucking Barber shop had closed. Vampire Video: closed. Dracula's Dry Cleaning: also closed. In fact, as they walked along, Kenan noticed that they didn't see a single other person on the streets. Not even a dog seemed to be about.

"Hey Kenan?" Kel asked, lost in thought. "Don't you think it's odd that everything is closed during the day and no one seems to be out on the streets at all?"

Kenan sighed. He had been trying for weeks

to convince Kel of the existence of vampires, but Kel had refused to accept it. *Might as well try again,* he thought to himself with resignation.

"Well, Kel, it would seem strange," he began patiently, locking his friendly eyes onto his friend's narrower gaze. "Except that this town is full of vampires and they can't come out during the day."

"Come on, Kenan." Kel pooh-poohed the idea. "You're not back on that crazy vampire kick, are you?" He shook his head. How could his friend be so gullible?

"It is not a kick!" Kenan blurted out firmly. "Look," he jabbed a finger toward one of the buildings on the side of the road. A banner hung over the front entrance. It read: "Vampire Dance: This Saturday. Only Vampires Allowed, Which Is Everyone, Because We're All Vampires." It was a very big sign.

"That's probably just a joke or something," Kel guessed with a shrug.

Kenan was going crazy. He had to get someone to listen to him. Someone had to believe his story. Someone had to know what to do.

Kenan pushed his way into his house. "Dad," he called out as his eyes scanned the room for his father.

"What?" Kel responded.

"Not you. I was calling for my dad."

"Ohhhhhhh! See, I thought you were calling for your Blad," Kel explained as if it made perfect sense.

Kenan shook his head as a look of wonder sat on his face like a two-ton porcupine ballerina. "What is a Blad?"

Kel's shoulders lifted up toward his ears. "I don't know, you said it."

"But— I—" Kenan started to protest and then stopped. *Why bother?*

Kenan rushed over to the stairs, cupped a hand to his mouth, and yelled upstairs. "Dad!"

"What?" Kel answered again.

Kenan's eyes squinted up tightly. "Didn't we just go through this?" he asked.

Behind them, the front door fell open with a creak. Roger poked his bald head inside, and his gaze fell on Kenan, causing a bright smile to light up his face.

"Kenan, just who I was hoping to see," he intoned in his deep, authoritative baritone.

Kenan turned and ran over to his father. "Me too, Daddy, it is so good to see you."

Roger laid a paternal hand on his son's shoulder. "Son," he said, "do you think that you could give me a hand bringing in something

from outside?" His tone was a little nicer than usual.

"Uh . . . sure, but I really have to talk to you first." Kenan followed his dad to the door as he spoke. "See, I know you're not going to believe me, but this whole town has become overrun with vampires!"

"No, it hasn't," Kel added helpfully. It wasn't at all helpful.

Kenan turned to face his friend and locked his eyes with Kel's in a steely glare. "Yes . . . it . . . has!"

Kenan's dad stared at him. His large, deep-set eyes seemed to bore right into Kenan's head. "Son, that's ridiculous. There are no such things as vampires. Now, help me lug this coffin upstairs."

Roger reached outside the front door and dragged a large wooden coffin into the living room. The coffin scraped across the floor with an eerie fingernails-on-the-chalkboard kind of grate.

Kenan's reaction was simple. He freaked out. "Dad!" he shrieked in disbelief, his tongue thick and heavy, almost unable to form the words as it lolled lifelessly against the side of his mouth. It was in some bizarre state of tongue-shock. "What are you doing with a coffin?" he finally managed to get out.

"Marc's Uncle Vlad gave it to me. He's such a nice man, don't you think?"

Actually, Kenan didn't think that Uncle Vlad was a nice man. Kenan thought that Uncle Vlad was an undead blood-sucking pawn of evil. Kenan was sure that he had his good points, too. He was clearly a sharp dresser and he seemed very polite, but it was hard to get past the whole demon thing.

"Now, let's see if we can get this thing upstairs," Roger said, gently patting the wooden side of the coffin. "I'm getting sleepy, and besides, all this bright sunlight is really starting to burn me." Roger glanced up the stairs, tilting his thick neck just enough for the collar of his dress shirt to pull away slightly. And that's when Kenan saw it.

Two small holes had punctured the skin of his neck.

Kenan's mouth retreated as far back from the rest of his face as it was able, pulling his lips back in a distorted grimace.

"Kel! Kel!" Kenan whispered, nudging his friend. "My daddy's been bit. He's gonna turn into a vampire!"

Kel slapped his friend playfully in the gut. "No, he's not. He probably just cut himself shaving. That's all."

Kenan was getting frustrated. This was getting ridiculous. Every time he pointed out evidence to Kel that vampires were overrunning the city, Kel didn't believe him. Well, he had had enough. Kel was going to start believing him right now.

Kenan reached out and yanked the collar of his dad's shirt down over the small circular wounds in his neck.

"Dad, what happened to your neck?" he asked bluntly.

Roger ran a thick hand over the holes in his skin. "Oh that?" he answered absently. "Well, it's sort of a funny story, really. See, Marc's uncle Vlad accidentally bit me and sucked my blood. But it was really just a big misunderstanding."

Kenan turned back to face his friend, an I-told-you-so look defiantly spread across his face. "Well, Kel, what do you have to say now?"

"K-k-k-kenan!" Kel trembled nervously, "I think Uncle Vlad might be a vampire!"

It was about time.

The sun was just beginning its descent as it drifted slowly down from the roof of the sky, its bright yellow rays fading ever so slightly.

Kenan glanced at his watch. It was four

o'clock. That was plenty of time to put his plan into effect. They still had several hours before dark. And several hours were all that they needed.

Kenan knew that something had to be done. After all, how long was he going to last in a town that was entirely populated with vampires? He briefly considered moving to a small island somewhere just north of Katmandu. He didn't exactly know where Katmandu was, but it sounded far away, and relatively vampire-free. But soon Kenan realized that he couldn't run away. After all, this was where his home was, this was where his family was. And, more importantly, this was where his comic book collection was, and it was far too large to be easily moved to some island. That was when he made up his mind. He was gonna stay and he was gonna fight. But how? There were so many vampires and so few of him.

He had spent the rest of the day reading all about vampires, everything he could get his hands on. It was a relatively easy thing to do, since now all the bookstores only stocked books on vampires. There were even a few pop-up books for Kel. And then, he found it.

He didn't have to fight all the vampires. All he

had to do was catch the head vampire. Once he got rid of him, the rest of the vampires would just turn back to normal. Kenan's jaw set in firm determination. If it was the head vampire they were after, Kenan knew exactly where they needed to go.

CHAPTER NINE

The door to the Crams' house pushed open with a soft creak, and Kenan and Kel hesitantly poked their heads inside. The living room was dark and silent. All the drapes had been drawn tight across the large front windows, blocking out all the sunlight, so that all that crept through the thick fabric of the curtains was a soft yellow glow.

"Hello, is anyone home?" Kel yelled out into the darkness, his voice echoing loudly through the empty rooms.

Kenan's hand shot out and smacked his friend in the back of the head. "Would you be quiet! We're trying to not let anyone know that we're here, remember?"

"I know. I was just seeing if there was anyone here first. Because if there wasn't we wouldn't have to be so quiet. See?" To Kel, it all made perfect sense, which was good, because that made one person that understood his logic.

"Would you just be quiet!" Kenan snapped. Then, with an assurance from Kel that he would, they crept farther into the darkened house. A painting that Kenan had never noticed before hung on the wall over the fireplace. It was a tall, dark painting that was framed in a thick border of wood that had been carved out, on each side, into a detailed image of a bat. Kenan peered at the painting. There was something familiar about it.

"Hey, it's Uncle Vlad!" Kel blurted out loud enough to make Kenan jump in surprise.

"Would you stop yelling!" Kenan scolded as he tried to talk his stomach down out of the place in his throat where it had leapt. He stepped back and looked at the picture from a few feet away. Kel was right. It did look a lot like Uncle Vlad. Same cape. Same slicked-back hair. Same sharp fangs. He noticed a date scrawled in the lower corner of the picture.

"1792?" Kenan read aloud with wonder. "But that would make him—"

Kel quickly did the math in his head. "That

would make him like twenty years old," he commented with amazing inaccuracy.

"No," Kenan's head shook softly from side to side. "That would make him at least two hundred years old."

"Man, that's like your parents' age," Kel marveled before Kenan yanked him off down the hallway to continue the search.

The plan was simple. All they had to do was break into his neighbors' house and search the place until they found the hidden coffin that contained Uncle Vlad. Then, they had to force him to turn everyone back to normal all before the sun went down and his dark powers became too much for them to handle. Seemed easy enough.

But there was a slight problem with the plan. Kenan and Kel couldn't find Uncle Vlad's coffin. In fact, they couldn't find any coffins, anywhere. They looked under the beds, in the cupboards—Kel even looked in the toilet—but there was no sign of any undead creatures of the night. They scoured the house from top to bottom, from side to side, from room to room, but they found . . . nothing. Time was running out. Outside, the sun had fallen almost halfway down the horizon, and the blue sky had begun to take on an orange tint as it prepared for the full Technicolor explosion of sunset.

"Man, where could they be?" Kenan moaned in frustration, flopping down on the bed in the Crams' master bedroom.

"Maybe," Kel guessed, "they gave up and moved to Japan to learn the ways of the ninja."

"Nah, they're not ninjas!" Kenan hissed. "They're vampires. And they gotta be here somewhere." He climbed back to his feet and began to pace across the room, wringing his hands together in front of him. *Where could they be? Where could they be? Where could they be?*

Kel had other things on his mind. He wandered over to the long wooden bookshelf that occupied a full wall of the bedroom. Its shelves were stuffed with books. There must have been hundreds in there. Hardcover and softcover and sponge cover. (You didn't find a lot of sponge cover books. They acted as both book and sponge in case you spilled anything while you were reading.) Kel spotted a book that seemed to interest him. It wasn't just the bright orange binding that drew his attention—it was also the title. In large, gold letters across the thick spine of the book it read, "A Brief History of Orange Soda." From the massive thickness of the book, the history didn't look brief at all, which was just fine with Kel. A wide, goofy smile broke out

across his narrow face as he grabbed the orange soda book. And then, something strange happened.

As soon as Kel removed the book from its space on the shelf, the entire wall spun around, taking Kel with it.

Kenan heard something and looked up. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The bookshelf looked exactly like it had looked before, with only one minor difference. There was no Kel standing in front of it.

Kenan glanced quickly around the room, trying to locate his friend, but he couldn't find him anywhere.

"Kel?" he called out, looking furtively from side to side.

"Kenan!" came the muffled reply.

Kenan heard him, but he couldn't see him.

"Kenan! Help!"

It sounded like it was coming from the bookcase. Kenan pressed his round face against the books.

"Kel?" he called out. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here!" Kel whined.

"How did you get back there?"

"I don't know. All I did was pick up a book about orange soda and then the wall spun around and now I'm back here in the dark."

The book! That must be it. "Put the book back!" Kenan ordered.

"But I haven't gotten to read it yet. It's all about orange soda and—"

"Just put it back!" Kenan yelled through the wall.

Kel huffed a disappointed reply. "Fine!"

And a moment later, the wall spun around again, taking Kenan with it. He disappeared behind the wall as the spinning bookshelf carried Kel back into the bedroom.

"Kenan?" Kel looked around for his friend. "Kenan, where are you?"

"I'm behind the wall!"

"What are you doing back there?" Kel asked, confused. After all, he had just been back there, and Kenan had made him come in here.

"I'm playing chess with a penguin," Kenan yelled, his frustrated voice laced with sarcasm.

"Really?" Kel's face lit up with excitement. He wasn't much of a chess player, but if penguins were involved, he wanted in. "I wanna play." He began hopping up and down excitedly from foot to foot.

"Well, then," Kenan's muffled voice responded in carefully measured tones, "pick the book back up."

Lines of confusion raced across Kel's forehead. "But you told me to—"

"Pick it up!" Kenan screamed, momentarily losing his grasp on calm.

Kel sighed, reached out, grabbed the book off the shelf one more time, and, in a whoosh of spinning wall, disappeared from the room.

The boys stood in a small concrete alcove. The walls were cool and moist, and somewhere, off in the distance, the dripping of water broke the silence with a steady *splink . . . splink . . . splink* sound.

The only exit out of the room was a long, narrow, winding staircase that curved away into darkness around the corner.

"Come on!" Kenan led the way over to the stairs and began descending them.

"But Kenan," Kel protested, not budging from his place by the bookshelf, "where's the penguin?" It was no use. Kenan had already vanished. "Kenan! Awwww!" Kel threw his hands down at his sides and rushed off after his friend.

The staircase spiraled down around a central concrete post, winding its way farther and farther down into the dark, dank bowels of the earth. Kenan and Kel crept slowly down from step to step, straining their eyes to see out

through the thick blackness that hung around them like a giant black blanket that had been dropped over their heads.

Slowly, little by little, Kenan's eyes began to adjust to the blackness. Or maybe, it was actually getting a little lighter. It was hard to tell. *No,* he thought, *there's definitely a light up ahead.* He could make out the faint glow from the bottom of the stairs.

"Kenan, I can't see anything," Kel complained, keeping one hand on his friend's shoulder to help guide his way.

Kenan turned back to look at Kel. He was about to tell him that there was light ahead, when he noticed something.

"Kel! Open your eyes!"

Kel's eyes fluttered open and blinked. "Oh, that's better," he offered up happily as they continued on down.

Kenan's mouth dropped open, hit the floor, and desperately tried to run away. His whole body went numb. His liver leapt inside his stomach to hide, and his toenails actually turned white and fell off.

Kel's response was a little different. "Wow, that's a lot of coffins!" he marveled.

It was an understatement. The enormous ex-

panse of the underground cavern that they found themselves in stretched off in all directions as far as the eye could see. It looked to Kenan like this underground lair probably stretched under every inch of Chicago. And laying across the rough stone floor of the room, in neat rows that stretched off into infinity, were coffins. Rows and rows and rows and rows of coffins. There were so many coffins in there that Kenan's eyes almost went blurry from coffin-overload.

"Every vampire in the town must be down here!" he whispered, and then, realizing that there was no need to whisper, he said it again, out loud. "Kel, what time is it?" Kenan asked nervously.

Kel held his wrist up in front of his eyes and squinted in the dim light of the cavern. "It's three forty-two," he announced.

Perfect, Kenan thought. *At least that gives us a little time before—wait a minute.* "Kel, how is it three forty-two right now, when it was four o'clock when we first came to the Crams' house?" He peered at his friend's hand and shook his head in frustrated wonder. "Man, you're not even wearing a watch."

"I know," Kel explained. "I didn't want to lose my watch, so I just looked at what time it was before we left and wrote it on my wrist. Pretty clever, eh? Eh?"

Kenan's face tensed up. He clenched his fists into tight little balls at his sides. "Whhh-hyyyyyyyy???!!!!!" his scream burst out across the room. It echoed off the walls, faded off into the distance, and then bounced back as it echoed off the far end of the cavern.

"Kel, we have to be out of here before sunset. And now, we don't know what time it is."

Just at that moment a lid burst off the nearest coffin and shot up into the sky. An undead vampiric figure stood up slowly, almost as if it was levitating. It was Vlad.

"Velcome to my home!" he purred evilly.

Kel was the first to speak. "Hey, you don't happen to know what time it is, do you? Because we gotta get out of here before the sun goes down and all the vampires come out."

Kenan quickly pulled his friend aside and whispered into his ear, gesturing wildly toward Vlad the whole time. Kel punctuated Kenan's frantic whispers with comments like "Really? You don't say," and "Who knew?" to which Kenan had to explain that *he* knew but no one would listen to him.

Finally, after Kel grasped the whole situation, he spoke. "Well then, we should get out of here before it gets dark out."

Vlad lowered his head and glared up at them

with red, glowing eyes. He slowly rose one corner of his lip, baring the razor-sharp fang underneath. His tongue flicked up and lapped at the sharp point of his tooth. "Too late," he said with a smug vampire grin.

And then, as if to prove that he wasn't lying, coffin lids began bursting off of coffins all across the room. As far as the eye could see and farther, vampires began to rise from their daily slumber. Kenan's eyes shot across the room in fear as he watched the undead bloodsuckers climb out of their claustrophobic resting places. Familiar faces lit by an unfamiliar evil glow paraded before his eyes. Marc Cram leapt out of one of the nearby coffins, his red eyes burning brightly from behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "Kenan!" he shouted happily, then bared his fangs to add, "I want to suck your blood."

Marc's parents were there, and so were his own. Even Kyra, his little sister, staggered out of a coffin and began marching slowly toward Kel. It seemed that even as a vampire, she loved Kel.

"Kenan, you're late to work," Vampire Chris leered, lifting his upper lip just high enough to show off a really long pair of teeth.

In one swift motion, Kenan whirled around to face Kel.

"Kel, this is the part where we scream and run away scared."

"Got it," Kel answered with a nod.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" the boys shrieked in unison as they turned and bolted for the stairs. But they were cut off. Vampire Roger and Vampire Sheryl were blocking their way.

"Son, you forgot to take out the trash," Roger's booming voice intoned.

His mother nodded along compassionately. "I'm sorry, dear, but we're going to have to suck your blood."

Kenan turned to his right, then to his left, but everywhere he looked, the red eyes and bared fangs of an army of vampires loomed down at him.

"Awwww, man!" he moaned to himself as the encroaching hordes of evil closed in on him and Kel. They were everywhere. There were hundreds of them, probably thousands of them. Kenan and Kel had nowhere to run. A thousand bloody, sharp teeth were bared in their direction. A collective evil hiss rose up from the vampire mass as they leaned in, eager for blood and—

Kenan's eyes bolted open. His breathing was rough and heavy and frightened. He looked

around his room and . . . it was his room. Quickly he shot his hands up to his neck and felt around, searching for puncture wounds, but he could find nothing.

A huge sigh of relief escaped his lips. He laughed quietly to himself. It was all just a dream. It seemed so real, but, thank goodness, it wasn't.

Kenan rolled over on his bed to face Kel, who was bundled up in a sleeping bag on the floor.

"Hey Kel, you're never gonna believe this crazy dream I had."

He climbed out of bed and walked over to his friend. "Kel, wake up." Grabbing a corner of the sleeping bag, he pulled it back and—

Kel leapt up at him with a snarl. Blood dripped from his long fangs—or was it orange soda? It was kind of hard to tell because it all happened so quickly. His evil red eyes burned themselves into Kenan's forehead as he opened his mouth and—

Kenan's eyes bolted open as he jerked awake from a deep sleep. He was breathing even more heavily than before. He blinked, then sighed slowly. It was all just a dream.

Or was it?

CLOSE

"Thank you! I hope you enjoyed our very scary Kenan and Kel adventure. I know I did. How about you, Kel? Kel? Where are you? Kel, you have to come out and say good-bye to the people."

"Oh . . . Sorry I'm late, Kenan."

"Uhhhh, Kel, what is that big contraption that you're wearing around your neck?"

"Oh, it's my invention. See, I was worried about falling asleep and having more bad dreams so I invented this to make sure that I stay awake. See, this string is attached to my eyes so that when they close, it releases this big wooden

hand which swings out and slaps me in the face, waking me up. Pretty clever, eh? Eh?"

"Uh . . . Kel, what happens if you blink?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I don't know, let me try."

SLAP.

"Owwwww."

"Thank you, Kel, now I know."

"Owwwwwwww."

"You know, Kel, I had so much fun in this book that I thought that I'd devote my life to battling evil."

"B-b-but Kenan, does that mean that you're going to drag me along to battle evil with you?"

"Yep."

"But I don't think I'd be very good at battling evil. See, I got this ingrown toenail that always acts up at the worst times. So, you see—"

"Don't worry about that, Kel. Now, go grab a stake, some garlic, and a vampire named Lance and meet me at the castle. Come on, toothy!"

"Kenan? I don't want to fight vampires. Kenan? My toe really hurts. Really! I'm not making that up! Kenan? Awwwww, here it goes!"

About the Author

STEVE HOLLAND currently resides in Los Angeles with his wife, Hannah, and son, Ellis. He has written for several Nickelodeon shows, including *Kenan and Kel* and *All That*. He is also the author of the books *All That: Fresh Out of the Box*, *Good Burger 2 Go*, and several *Kenan and Kel* adventures.

KENAN & KEL

FRANKELSTEIN

Kenan: Good evening faithful reader, and welcome to another Kenan and Kel adventure.

Kel: **Yeah, and if you get a chance, could you slip a sandwich or something into the book for me? I'm starving in here.**

Kenan: Kel! Would you stop thinking about your belly?

Kel: **I wasn't thinking about my belly. I was thinking about food.**

Kenan: Well, stop it! I'm trying to talk to the people who are reading this right now. I need to warn them.

Kel: **Warn them? What do you have to warn them about?**

Kenan: Thanks for asking. Listen closely, dear reader, for you are about to hear a tale so terrifying, so scare-ifying, so amazingly, unbelievably horrifying, that it may actually cause your head to explode and your big toe to shrink in fear.

Kel: **B-b-b-but Kenan, I don't like scary stories. Scary stories scare me.**

Kenan: Well, Kel, then you may want to skip pages 12–25. They're really scary. Oh, and some real scary stuff also happens on pages 27, 32, 33, 36, and 42. But you can go ahead and read page 43, 'cause I say something really funny there.

Kel: **What about the rest of the book? Is it scary, too?**

Kenan: There's only one way to find out. Turn down the lights, lock all the doors, and start reading. Now come on, Spooky.

Kel: **But Kenan, if I turn down the lights, how will I be able to read? Kenan? Can't I read a happy story instead, you know maybe something about fuzzy little bunnies? Kenan? Awwww, here it goes!**

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